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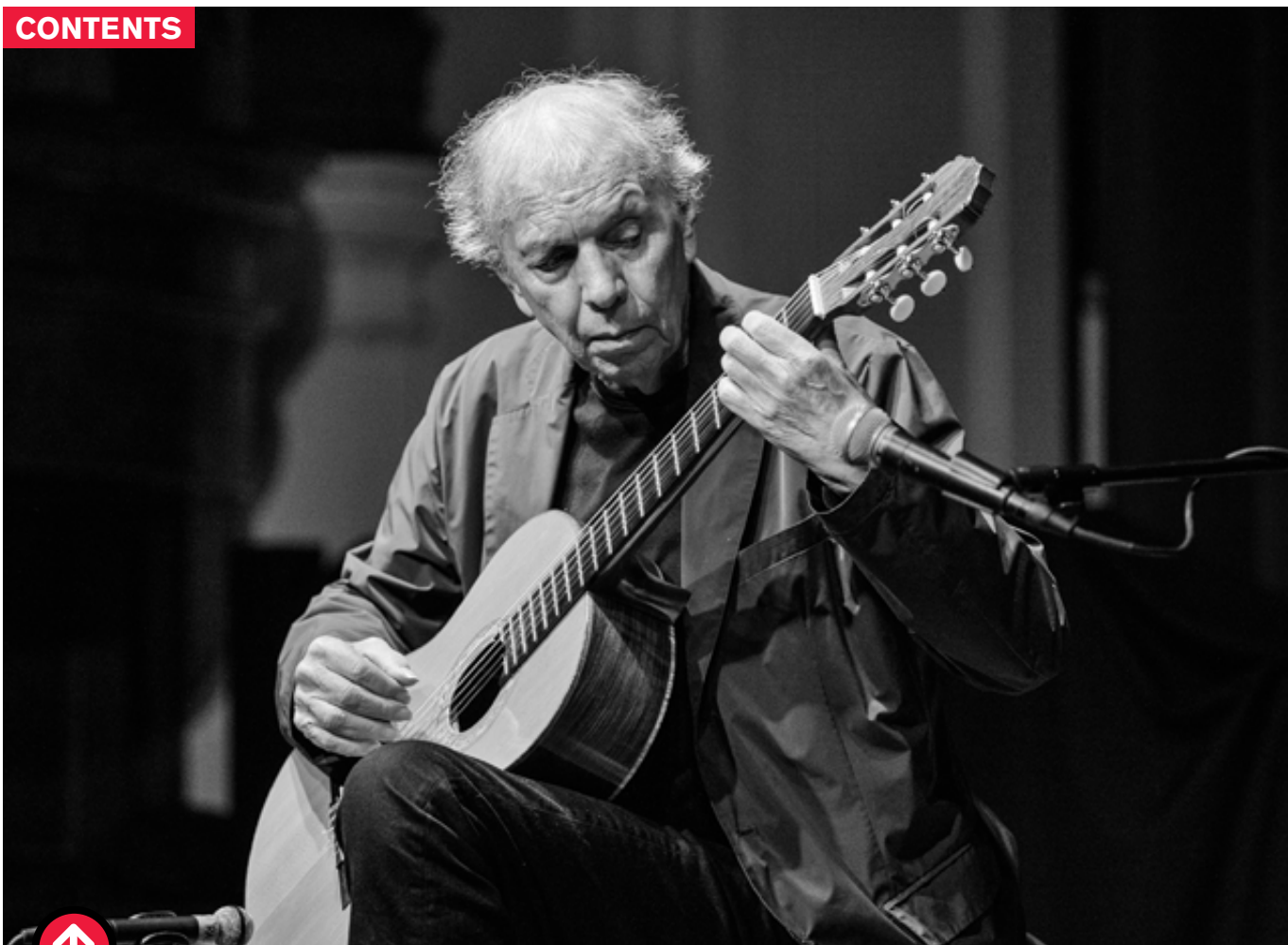
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'I basically write by playing. If I discover something as I'm practicing on the instrument, I'll want to pursue it further.'
—Ralph Towner
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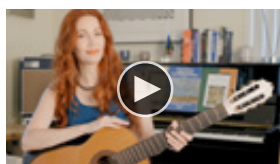
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SUSTAINABLE ENERGY

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"ON TOP OF OLD SMOKY"

A lonesome waltz with a sweet melody. (p. 66)



SUPER D AND D-18 STREETLEGEND

Two new-look Martin dreadnoughts. (p. 74)

the ACOUSTIC GUITAR podcast

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In the most recent episode of the Acoustic Guitar Podcast, Bruce Cockburn discusses songwriting, creativity, and guitars, and gives an impromptu lesson on what he calls "EGAD" tuning. Listen and subscribe at AcousticGuitar.com/podcast or wherever you get your podcasts!



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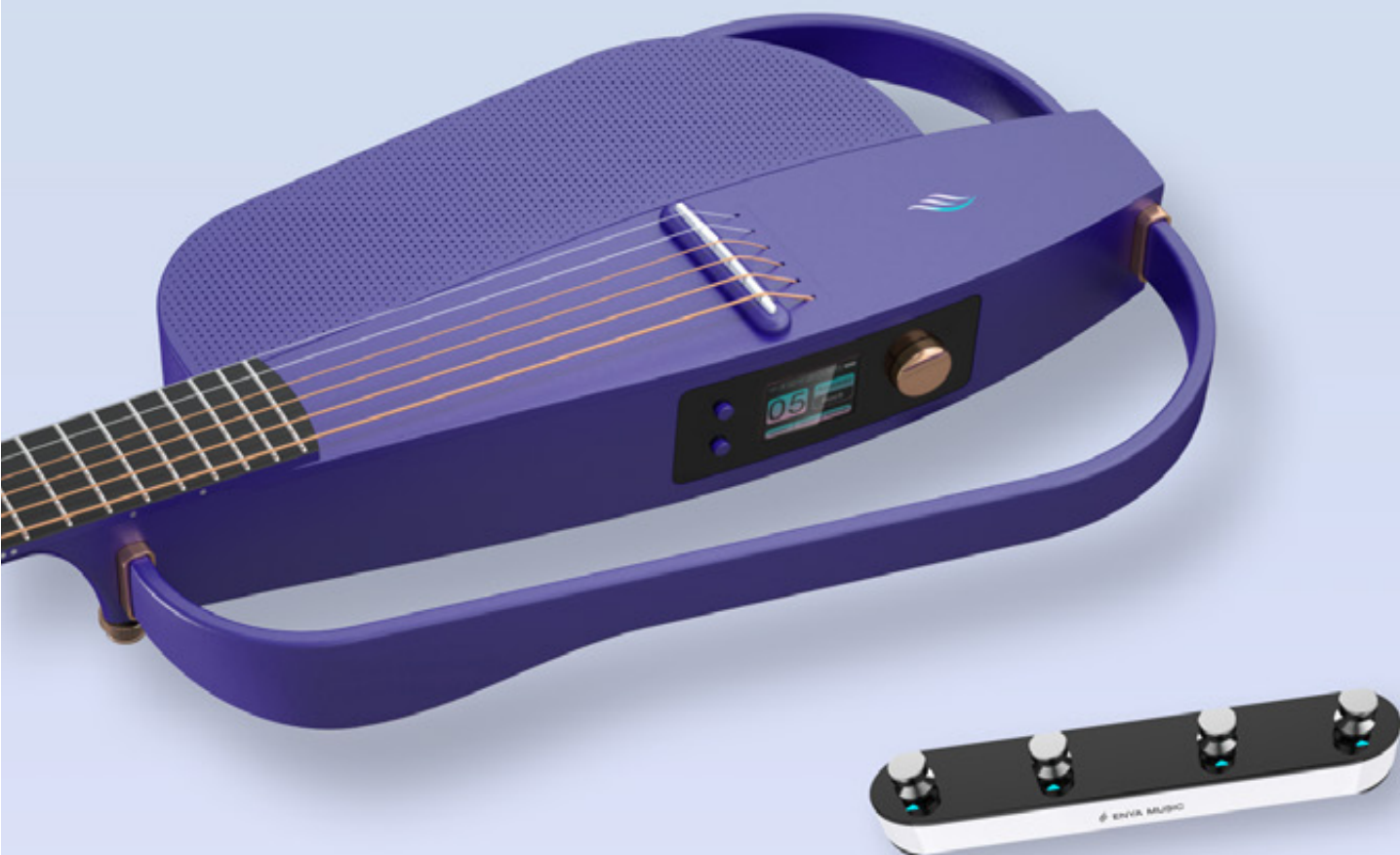
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THE FRONT PORCH



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: JOEY LUSTERMAN. PHOTOS: MICHAEL BENZ; MARTIN GUITAR

Ever since the magazine's debut in 1990, *Acoustic Guitar* has gotten inside the minds of so many of the world's great players, both steel- and nylon-string, and in all styles. In the very first issue, July/August 1990, cover star Sharon Isbin fielded questions about auditioning a new classical guitar and setting practice tempos; she, along with Doc Watson, Norman Blake, Michael Hedges, and others, also remembered her first guitar, custom-made by an Italian luthier.

In an in-depth feature in the fourth issue (January/February 1991), Ralph Towner, the virtuoso nylon- and 12-string guitarist-composer and co-founder of the jazz and world music ensemble Oregon, revealed how his discovery of jazz piano great Bill Evans altered the course of his musical life, especially as seen in a transcription of his then-new composition "Guitarra Picante." (I would be remiss not to mention both of these *AG* issues—and all of the 300-something others—are available for instant download at store.acousticguitar.com.)

More than 30 years later, this current issue reconnects with both Isbin and Towner, who are at the top of their game. Isbin, on the cover for the second time, has long worked tirelessly to expand the repertoire and reach of the classical guitar. She reports that she has never played with better technique and is still finding new nuances in the pieces that she has worked on for many years.

Having recently released a beautiful new solo album, *At First Light*, Towner explains his methodology for putting his own imprint on jazz

standards, the idiosyncratic approach he takes to composing, and how at 83 he maintains the control needed to play music of such brilliant complexity on the classical guitar. As a companion to the Towner feature, we have included a new transcription of "Guitarra Picante," taken note for note from the new album.

We also look back to a song that premiered in the same era as the magazine and has never appeared in these pages—Tracy Chapman's Grammy-winning "Fast Car," which has been enjoying a resurgence in popularity, thanks to a recent cover version by country superstar Luke Combs.

At the same time, this issue ponders the future of the instrument we all love and cherish. Acoustic guitarists tend to take for granted the tropical tonewoods that have long been used to build their instruments—mahogany, rosewood, ebony, etc.—and now that these materials are no longer in abundant supply, makers must rethink how guitars are designed and built.

In a special feature, Scott Paul, director of natural resource sustainability at Taylor Guitars, and C.F. Martin CEO Thomas Ripsam discuss how they have been meeting these challenges head on. Whether made from trees removed from the urban canopy, or having four-piece soundboards rather than two, you can expect your future new guitar to look a little different—but have the same old soul.

—Adam Perlmutter

Adam.Perlmutter@Stringletter.com

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GUITAR TALK



EDUARDO URIBE

Sounds of the Jungle

The eclectic guitarist Twanguero camps out in the Costa Rican rainforest and emerges with a beautiful nylon-string album

BY EMILE MENASCHÉ

If there's one place you're unlikely to find Diego Garcia—the Spanish-born guitarist better known as Twanguero—it's in a rut. Combining European, classical, flamenco, Latin American, and North American influences, this Latin Grammy winner is always ready to explore. Both his playing and approach to composition are richly diverse—yet they're cohesive enough to come across as the personal expression of an artist who, in his own words, “tells stories with six strings.”

But even for someone celebrated for his fluency in different genres of guitar playing, from steel-string acoustic to nylon-string to electric, the latest Twanguero album, *Carreteras Secundarias Vol. II (Back Roads, Vol. II)*, is something of a departure.

The studio? A Costa Rican jungle. That venue would be challenging enough without the added factor of the instrument he used: a nylon-string made to the specifications of one of the earliest guitars ever built. While the album teems with nature sounds cap-

tured as ambience, the music itself isn't locked in one place or time. Instead, it's like a journal, a reflection on both a brilliant guitarist's technique and on the meaning of place in a world that, at the time, was isolated by Covid lockdowns.

I connected with a Twanguero, who currently lives on a houseboat in southern California, during a visit to his family hometown of Valencia, Spain. In a video call, he talked about the recording and guitar techniques behind the project, as well as the Torres replica he brought with him.

One of the unique things about the record is where it was recorded. Tell us about your “studio.”

I went to Costa Rica for more than three months and rented a cabin in the middle of the jungle. Right before the pandemic, Ramírez, the classical guitar maker in Madrid, built me a special guitar [a tablao], based on one of the first guitars ever built, by Antonio Torres.

They made me a model from Central America wood and brought it to me at the NAMM show in 2019.

The original idea was to do an album of Latin American music while traveling; I wanted to go to Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Guatemala, go down to different studios. But the pandemic arrived. I stayed in California for a year—I live on a boat there. And when I finally decided to travel, Costa Rica was the only place I could go.

My idea was doing an offering to the trees for this beautiful gift they gave me. I wanted to do this experience of recording outside—basically, just me and a nylon-string and all this Latin American stuff I'd known for years.

Were you recording existing material, or were you composing in the jungle?

The compositions were what I really wanted to do. It was practicing every day, early in the morning in the middle of the jungle. I was just practicing and composing and listening to get inspiration from the sounds of the

jungle. I basically wrote all of the pieces there. And then at some point, I had this collection of music.

Did specific sounds of nature influence you?

Yes, actually—the birds. There were some birds that were literally singing in D. So I said, “Maybe this is the key of the jungle.” I mean, there’s no science based on this; it’s just pure instinct and emotion. I also realized that I could control the cicadas—when I played guitar, they slowed down and almost turned off.

When I was just by myself, the sound of the jungle was a symphony. It was monkeys everywhere and birds. But I found a place near to my cabin to sit down to practice, and the whole sound of the rainforest dimmed. I don’t know if it was listening to me, or I was an intrusive element, but the animals slowed down and it was pretty quiet when I was playing.

Did you record everything on the nylon-string?

Yes, it’s 100 percent nylon-string. I had to grow my nails strong because of the humidity. I was eating a lot of avocado and fish—that was key. The way I was eating in the jungle, my nails got very strong, more so than when I’m in the city.

Was it hard to keep the guitar in tune?

It was, especially at the beginning. At some point, the guitar got used to it—at least in my romantic mind [it did]. I think that at first the guitar realized that it wasn’t in its natural environment. After a week or so, it stabilized, but at the beginning, it was a nightmare—especially since it was based on an instrument made around 180 years ago, down to the old-style, violin-like tuning pegs.

Talk about the first song, “La Leyenda de Cañaveral.”

It’s about a cane field, a very rural environment full of birds. That song is in 6/8 and is a typical Central American huapango. It’s in dropped D, which was a tuning that was better for the guitar—don’t ask me why. But having the sixth string dropping to D kept the tuning better than standard.

Was dropped D that the only alternate tuning you used? And did you also use some standard tuning?

I did some standard tuning in a few songs. But I did a lot of the detuning for that song and another one called “Samba De La Jungla.” I also used dropped D on “Pampa” and “Iguazú,” which is in 6/8. There’s a dominance of 6/8 rhythm, characteristic of Latin American music. I played it fingerstyle [*sings*

rhythmic pattern] with an alternating bass line, which has a lot of things in common with the Chet Atkins thing.

One of the things that stands out on the record is your use of texture and dynamics within the rhythms. It’s so fluid and textured, instead of just loud versus soft. You know what I mean?

Absolutely. Each song is an attempt to tell a story. And when I tell a story to someone, there’s no intention to be dynamic, but the story itself has its own dynamic. It’s like reading a chapter of a book; the story comes with a melody. And naturally, I find those elements. Especially in the first song, I tried to tell the story of the conversation with the birds through music, relaying that conversation to human beings. It’s hard to explain, but for me,

‘My idea was doing an offering to the trees for this beautiful gift they gave me’

—TWANGUERO

that’s the most important thing—telling you a story with the six strings of a guitar. So it has to be dynamic and in the moment.

Part of the reason it works is that you managed to capture those dynamics in the recording. What equipment did you use?

It was pretty simple: my MacBook with Pro Tools and an Apogee Duet interface, as well as a couple of [Neumann] KM 184s, a matched pair. I tried to isolate the guitar as if I were in the studio, and I added the ambience during the night after I had tracked the guitar, manipulating it a bit to make it fit the album and feel more romantic.

The record captures something that you have all the time in the jungle—those particular frequencies. Some friends of mine have the vinyl version, and they say, “For vinyl, I think we need less jungle.” And I say no, this is 29 minutes in the jungle, and that is the whole experience. Other friends have told me, “Maybe you should record the album in the studio, clean.” And I say, “No, man—that’s not the point.”

I’m guessing the performances would be different in a studio setting. There’s

something very unhurried about your playing on this. Did recording on location contribute to that?

Right—there’s no rush. And maybe you do [push harder] in the studio. You know, last year I did almost 80 shows of this album. I went through the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Europe. And now obviously the repertoire has changed, my performance has changed a lot. But when I was in the jungle, there was no rush in the songs.

One of the songs is called “Lullaby.” It’s a very long Debussy-inspired lullaby. Now when I listen to it, it’s like a meditation. I was in the cabin in the middle of the jungle and there were some wild pigs making noise all night long around my cabin. I said, “Okay, I’m gonna do a lullaby to make these pigs go to sleep!” So each song was definitely related to recording on location.

The tone on this record is very warm and woody. How do you approach tone and technique as a player who moves between acoustic and electric guitars and plays both steel- and nylon-strings?

In this case, I worked a lot with my right hand, but closer to an Andrés Segovia technique in terms of thumb and hand placement. My teacher [José Lázaro Villena] was a long-term student of Segovia—he is now 98 years old. He’s actually here in Valencia, and I’m going to visit him in a couple of weeks.

Segovia had a really powerful right hand, and I had to work again to try to remember the technique, because it had been a long time since I had studied it. My technique has changed a lot because I travel a lot. I went to Argentina, Brazil, and the guys there, the position is different when they play. And also, I’m a big fan of Merle Travis and Chet Atkins, who used a right-hand [technique] where you mute. So my classical technique was literally destroyed. If I see my teacher now, he will say, “What have you done? I didn’t teach you this right hand!” [*Laughs.*]

I tried to remember what my teacher used to tell me to produce that deep sound, where the thumb rests. It’s a hard technique, because you have to develop a real independence between the thumb and the rest of the fingers. It’s not like Mark Knopfler, where he rests his hand over the top. In classical, you cannot do that because you’re going to kill all the harmonics. The classical guitar position is not just an aesthetic thing—it also makes sense for the right hand—and I had to change that, too. I had to study for months before I went to the jungle with that old technique. I had to reinvent myself and kind of forget all the things I normally do. **AC**



MORE THAN *jazz*

THE PERENNIALY
ECLECTIC GUITARIST
RALPH TOWNER
IS STILL DEFYING
CATEGORIZATION

BY BLAIR JACKSON



It's been 50 years since Ralph Towner's first album solely under his name, *Diary*, came out on producer Manfred Eicher's groundbreaking ECM Records label.

Towner had already been recognized as a great up-and-coming player for his work in the Paul Winter Consort and the remarkably eclectic quartet Oregon, both of whom could be labeled chamber jazz groups that also played "world music" before that label existed. *Diary*, however, was all Towner, playing 12-string acoustic and nylon-string classical guitar, piano, and gong(!) on a wide-ranging set of pieces that found him sometimes performing solo, other times layering in another instrumental voice, effectively duetting with himself. The music was moody, exploratory, often lyrical, occasionally dissonant—and always interesting.

Towner is usually classified as a jazz player and composer, but to me that feels limiting (even as "jazz" has become so all-encompassing). Yes, he cites John Coltrane, Bill Evans, and many other jazz greats as seminal influences. Yes, he has played and recorded with Charlie Haden, Larry Coryell, Joe Zawinul, Keith Jarrett, John Abercrombie, Paul McCandless, Gary Peacock, Wayne Shorter, and so many other jazz masters. And yes, he has always been devoted to improvisation and using harmonies often found in jazz. But that label disregards such myriad inspirations as Brazilian, Indian, modern classical, folk, and popular tunes from the Great American Songbook, as well as the fact that his guitar style has been hugely informed by classical-guitar technique.

At 83, the hugely prolific Towner—25 or so albums as a leader, another 30 with Oregon, and many more where he has appeared as a guest player—is still writing and recording vital, involving pieces that draw on his lifetime of musical passions and influences. His latest ECM release, his first since the excellent *My Foolish Heart* in 2017, is called *At First Light*, and it was recorded using only solo classical guitar—no 12-string this time out (nor keyboards or trumpet or any other instruments on which he is fluent). The album has achingly beautiful melodic moments, intriguing rhythmic turns, passages that seem to float into the ether, pieces that feel like they tell a wordless story, and others that maybe ask a question: in other words, typical Ralph Towner.

Towner has lived in Rome, Italy, for many years, and in an email interview, he shared thoughts on his latest project and his process of composing and arranging for guitar.



ROBERTO MASOTTI



STEFAN OLDENBURG

SEARCHING FOR SONGS

Most of the tracks on *At First Light* are original compositions, including a stripped-down version of the spirited early-'90s Oregon tune "Guitarra Picante" (see transcription on page 58) and an extended extrapolation on "Ubi Sunt" from *My Foolish Heart*. As has often been the case on his solo records, there are also a couple of imaginative interpretations of standards—Hoagy Carmichael's "Little Old Lady" and Jule Styne's "Make Someone Happy"—plus the traditional Irish tune "Danny Boy."

"Each standard attracted me at some time," he said when I asked about his approach to the songs he pulled apart and reworked. "I try to make them sound comfortable on the classical guitar, along with reharmonizations that set the melodies in relief."

As for his own new originals on the album, Towner noted, "The songs were composed or arranged at separate times during the few

years that preceded the recording." His pieces usually evolve from improvisations that he writes down as they take form. "I listen to myself," he said, "and differentiate between what is a catalyst for a composition and what is a random collection of sounds."

In a 2017 interview from Anil Prasad's book *Innervisions: Music Without Borders*, Towner expanded on his writing methodology: "It's related to wanting to complete an idea. 'I basically write by playing. If I discover something as I'm practicing on the instrument, I'll want to pursue it further. I'll discover the first few elements of it and then telescope it into a whole piece. I'm curious to see how the stories turn out. Writing is like reading for me. Similar to when I start a book, if the material reaches out and grabs me, I'm pulled along just like a reader is, wondering where the piece is going to go. In that way, I'm almost a member of the audience seeing how the piece will unfold. I've always

The trio MGT: Towner with Wolfgang Muthspiel and Slava Grigoryan



been quite driven in the solo element. I've always wanted to ensure my work, particularly on the classical guitar, holds together and is fully realized."

Towner noted in an ECM label interview that his own compositions include trace elements of composers and musicians that attract him, including George Gershwin, John Coltrane, Baroque-era Irish harpist John Dowland, and perhaps his biggest influence, jazz pianist Bill Evans. *At First Light*, Towner said, "is a good example of shaping this expanse of influences into my personal music."

And as he added in our interview, "Upon hearing the rough mix of this album, I found that the songs all seemed to be mileposts in my life of music."

A PIANIST WHO PLAYS GUITAR

As befits a musician whose mother was a piano teacher and whose father was trum-

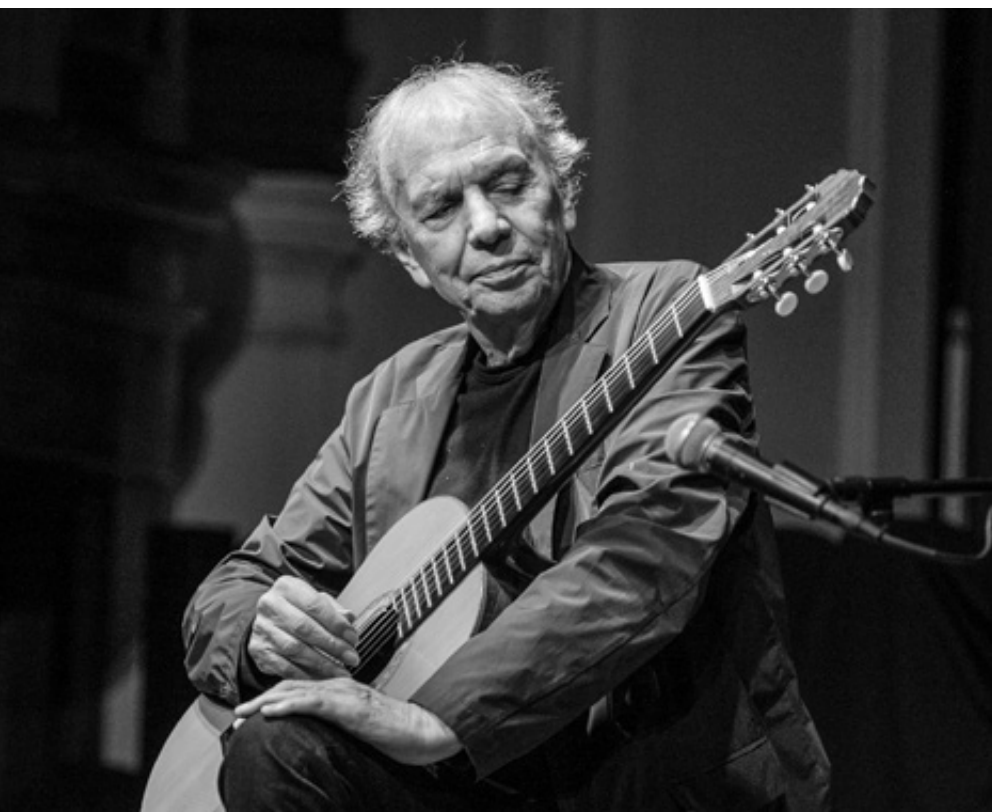
peter, Towner was a skilled pianist and horn player long before he seriously took up the guitar. During his years at the University of Oregon, where he studied composition, Towner walked into a music store to buy "a trumpet mute or music paper, and there was a salesman-type there who sold me a classical guitar," he recalled. "I taught myself a little bit and then wrote a composition for flute and guitar."

Smitten with the guitar, he enrolled in the prestigious Vienna Academy to study classical guitar intensively with esteemed teacher and player Karl Scheit (sometimes called the "Segovia of Austria") in 1963–64 and again in 1967–68. All through the '60s, too, Towner was listening to Brazilian music that featured nylon-string guitar played by such notables at João Gilberto, Antônio Carlos Jobim, Luiz Bonfá, and Baden Powell—much of which seeped into the American jazz world.

However, when Towner moved from Oregon to New York City following his second stint with Scheit, he found it easier to get gigs as a pianist than as a guitarist, so his evolution as primarily a guitarist happened gradually.

In 1970, a new wrinkle was added when Towner joined the Paul Winter Consort and Winter asked him to try playing 12-string guitar. Though it was quite a change from nylon-string acoustic, Towner mastered the instrument fairly quickly, and it became an important part of his arsenal for the rest of his career—especially once he and Consort bandmates Paul McCandless, Glen Moore, and Collin Walcott split to form the groundbreaking group Oregon. Just as Towner's playing and composing for nylon-string is utterly unique, so too is his 12-string repertoire. Even so, he has often referred to himself as a piano player who plays guitar.

"Piano technique plays an important role in my guitar playing and composition in general,"



JOHN CRONIN

'Piano technique plays an important role in my guitar playing and composition in general!'

—RALPH TOWNER

he told me. "Julian Bream was a great example of a guitarist playing in a more pianistic style."

TOOLS OF HIS TRADE

Towner has played a variety of classical guitars through the years, including a pair of Ramírez models from 1964 and 1972. Over the past three decades, however, his favored nylon-string guitars have been custom models. "The guitar I used on *At First Light* was built by Australian luthier Jim Redgate," Towner says.

Redgate first made Towner a double-top guitar around 2010. (Fairly common in the classical guitar world, the double-top design employs two thin wooden soundboards sandwiching a very thin layer of honeycombed strengthening material such as the polymer Nomex, said to enhance the projection and flexibility of the top.)

After playing that double top for a few years, Towner wanted a traditional instrument similar to one Redgate had made for Australian classical guitarist Slava Grigoryan. (Towner made two exceptional trio albums with Grigoryan and Austrian guitarist Wolfgang Muthspiel as MGT—don't miss their 2013 release *Travel Guide*.) Redgate says, "The one I made for Ralph that he uses now is a traditional fan-braced cedar top guitar with Honduras rosewood back and sides and a full French polish

finish. He sold the double top and just has the traditional guitar now."

Since 1995, Towner has also owned several classical guitars made by Portland, Oregon-based luthier Jeffrey Elliott, the first of which was a co-build with Elliott's colleague Cyndy Burton made from European spruce and Indian rosewood. Towner described the Elliott/Burton guitar a few years ago as "old faithful; the most perfectly balanced guitar I've ever played."

As for Towner's 12-strings, they've all been Guilds, such as an F-212 that he played on the Weather Report track "The Moor" on that group's first record. He also has a series of custom instruments from the Guild workshop, including a mahogany-bodied Florentine cutaway F-212 and an F-512, both with necks that more closely match the width of his classical guitars.

DAILY PRACTICE

Towner doesn't travel as much as he once did, but his playing schedule is still sprinkled with occasional gigs in various European cities (which are easily accessible since he's based in Rome), and in April 2023 he even played in Shanghai. In recent years, he's recorded his ECM albums with Manfred Eicher at a studio in nearby Lugano, Switzerland—usually in just a couple of days of live track-

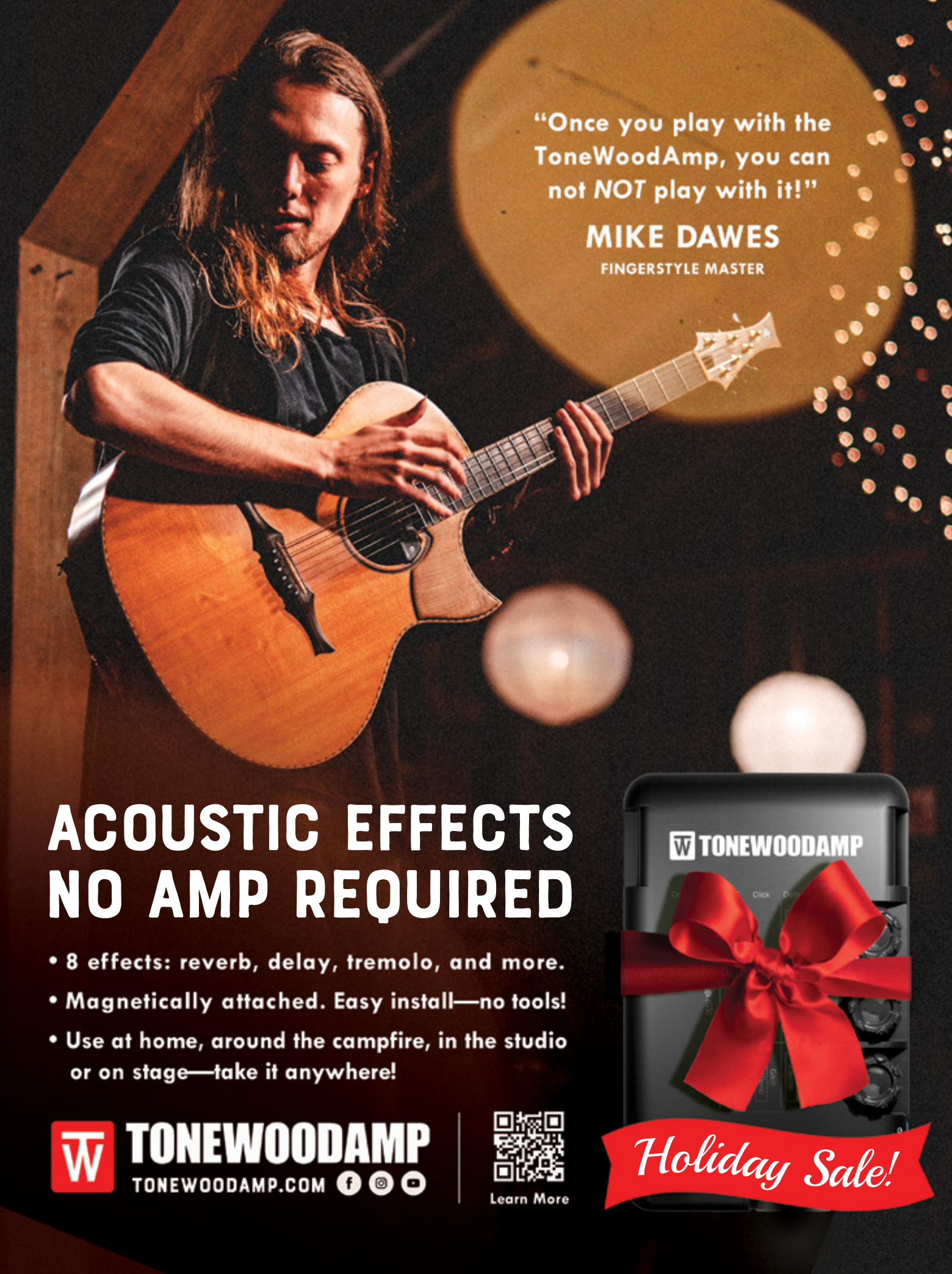
ing, as they have done for the last 50 years. Hey, if it ain't broke...

"I still play every day," Towner says when I ask whether he's made adjustments to his practice regimen as he's gotten older. "I have a few exercises that wake up my hands, but I find it better to immediately play music, as it deals directly with the refinements in muscular control necessary to produce the tone and dynamics needed. Then, a week before a concert I usually start working with pieces I intend to perform."

He's also still writing all the time—sitting down with a guitar or at a piano keyboard and improvising, or retrieving fragments of ideas from his extremely fertile mind, perhaps remembering and reworking some riff or passage from one his hundreds of compositions, or the thousands of others he has played; shaping them slowly but surely into something brand new. Because that's what he does.

I concluded our interview by asking Towner if he listens much to his older music and what he thinks when he hears it. His answer was typically self-effacing: "I am listening more often to music I previously recorded and am often surprised at how well-played those albums were." No surprise here. That's what the rest of us—the fans—have thought all along.

AC

A man with long brown hair and a beard, wearing a dark t-shirt, is playing an acoustic guitar. He is looking down at the guitar. The background is dark with warm, bokeh light effects. A large, glowing yellow circle is in the upper right.

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SIX STRING SOJOURNER

Sharon Isbin has circled the globe expanding the reach, reputation, and repertoire of the classical guitar

BY MARK SMALL

Like a long-distance runner, classical guitarist Sharon Isbin sets her sights on mileposts ahead and after passing them, moves steadily toward the next. Her course has brought her to performances in the world's most iconic venues (including the Obama White House), and collaborations with distinguished composers and conductors as well as performers from a multiplicity of non-classical genres. Her discography spans more than 35 albums, with two entries netting her Grammy awards. Isbin summited a new peak last summer when she received the Artistic Achievement Award from the Guitar Foundation of America (GFA) and was named its 2023 Hall of Fame inductee—two honors bestowed on the brightest lights in the classical guitar firmament.

In presenting the award at the finale of the GFA's 2023 convention in New York, marking the organization's 50th anniversary, artistic director Brian Head cited Isbin's "transformational contributions to the world guitar community and artistic excellence" among the reasons she was chosen.

Antigoni Goni, a former Isbin student and now colleague, speaks in personal terms of her teacher's indelible influence on her. "Sharon takes a deep breath and dives fully into every challenge without second thoughts," Goni shares. "Not because she feels superhuman—she once told me she feels very human—but she knows there are no second chances. For me as a young aspiring guitarist in my early 20s, being around her energy was simply incredible."





One of Isbin's many crossover collaborations was with rock guitar hero Steve Vai.

The week after the GFA event, when Isbin was in Massachusetts as a guest artist at Boston GuitarFest, I met up with her for a conversation about her groundbreaking career as a performer and teacher.

CLASSIC SOUNDS AND NEW REALMS

In her concert the night before the GFA awards ceremony, Isbin spotlighted repertoire spanning her career and musical proclivities, juxtaposing audience favorites by Enrique Granados, Agustín Barrios, Antonio Lauro, and Francisco Tárrega with lengthier, listener-challenging works by Leo Brouwer and Tan Dun.

"The program was a retrospective of music I'm often associated with," Isbin says. "I chose three pieces by Leo Brouwer, including *El Decameron Negro*, which he wrote for me. That one marks a seminal moment in both of our careers. The two other Brouwer pieces rounded out a representation of the three compositional style periods in his life to celebrate his upcoming 85th birthday."

Another highlight of Isbin's GFA concert was Tan Dun's "7 Desires," a solo work the Chinese composer derived from the themes of *Yi2*, the concerto he penned for her in 1996. The 11-minute piece finds common ground between playing techniques of the four-stringed Chinese pipa and Spanish flamenco guitar. Juxtaposing rapid-fire tremolo passages and percussive slaps with introspective melodies demanded much from the player, and Isbin carried it off flawlessly.

Isbin is noted for her onstage charisma and playing with precision, variegated colors, and heartfelt expression. At her GFA concert, she drew the audience inside the music, reveling for long stretches with closed eyes, holding listeners enraptured until the final notes faded. After sitting motionless—sometimes for 15 seconds—she slowly lowered her left hand from the guitar neck, opened her eyes and smiled, gestures that assured the audience it was OK to exhale and applaud.

Isbin believes blending staples of the repertoire with sometimes abstract contemporary compositions is an effective way to introduce listeners to new and unfamiliar musical territories. "You've already won them over with music that's accessible," she says. "Pieces like Brouwer's 'La Espiral Eterna' or '7 Desires' give the audience a chance to go to a new realm. Once they're with you, they will trust you on this journey."

EARLY BREAKTHROUGHS

Isbin's musical peregrinations started when she was nine years old. Her family was living in Italy then, and she began guitar lessons with local teachers. Years later, Andrés Segovia, Oscar Ghiglia, Rosalyn Tureck, and other luminaries mentored her. The promise of a bright future was apparent well before she earned her bachelor's degree at Yale and master's at that university's school of music.

Isbin suddenly appeared on the radar of the classical guitar community after winning



Clockwise from top left: with Nancy Wilson from Heart; with Joan Baez; at Carnegie Hall with Sting; post-White House performance with the Obamas

the Guitar Society of Toronto's competition in 1975. She took first prize in a field where the finalists were none other than Manuel Barrueco, Eliot Fisk, and David Leisner, all of whom went on to establish illustrious careers.

"I was only a teenager then," Isbin recalls. "I didn't enter thinking I would win. I did it for the experience and got lucky. Many things evolved after that."

One important connection forged at the Toronto competition was with Cuban guitarist and composer Leo Brouwer, who played a concert and caught Isbin's attention with his fresh and exotic music. He too noted her formidable abilities and they became acquainted. After recording two of his pieces on her 1978 debut recording, *Sharon Isbin: Classical Guitar*, she sent him the album. Then, in 1981, out of the blue, she received an envelope from Brouwer containing the three-movement suite *El Decameron Negro* with a dedication to her. Today, the piece is a key part of her legacy and a standard of the repertoire.

Isbin won two more international competitions before completing her college studies and launching her career in earnest. Like many others, she has furthered the goals Segovia long ago envisioned for the guitar. They included elevating it to the status of a classical concert instrument; commissioning contemporary composers to write for it; and establishing guitar performance curricula at conservatories, colleges, and universities.

"I feel Segovia's dreams have been major inspirations in terms of working with composers and reaching out beyond the guitar world to get those who never would have written for the instrument to write for it," Isbin says. "It took ten years of twisting John Corigliano's arm to get him to write a guitar concerto for me."

MENTORING THE NEXT GENERATION

By 1989, in addition to her touring and recording, Isbin became the founding director of the Juilliard School's guitar department. In 1993, she took on directorship of the summer guitar

program at the Aspen Music Festival and School. More recently, she instituted a doctoral program for guitar at Juilliard. Her student Alberta Khoury of Australia became the program's first enrollee following a rigorous vetting process in which Juilliard's doctoral committee selects four or five candidates across the spectrum of musicians.

Through the years, Isbin has helped countless guitarists hone their skills. Remarkably, four former students, Antigoni Goni, Kevin Gallagher, TY Zhang, and Bokyoung Byun, have won first prize at the GFA competition. At this year's contest, her current student Alan Liu took third prize.

"It's been gratifying to see students grow, find their inner voice, and develop the maturity and musical values that can carry them forward in the future," she declares. "The things I focus on include teaching them to use color effectively and to have an arsenal of articulations and nuances that can enhance and express the music."



TESSA SEVERINS

WHAT SHE PLAYS

Sharon Isbin plays a 2010 Antonius Müller cedar double-top guitar, with a standard 650mm fingerboard scale. Her string choices are Savarez New Cristal Blue (high tension) for the first, New Cristal Red (normal tension) for the second, and Alliance Red (normal tension) for the third. She uses Savarez Cantiga Blue (high tension) polished basses for the fourth and fifth strings, and an unpolished Cantiga Blue for the sixth. —MS

This was readily apparent in her interactions with students in master classes at the GFA and Boston GuitarFest in June. Isbin encouraged the players to try fingerings they hadn't considered to unlock the guitar's colors. She had them experimenting with various approaches to vibrato, adding slurs in the left hand, moving to higher or lower neck positions, or employing campanella in short scalar passages, resulting in fretted notes and open strings ringing together. She picked up on minute fingering problems some players seemed unaware of and demonstrated solutions to polish their performance; she instructed them on shaping phrases with dynamics when ascending or descending to a target note, and on varying timbral colors upon section repeats. These classes provided a glimpse inside the tool kit of expressive devices she uses to craft finely honed interpretations.

"Something I find so special about the guitar is the possibility of an enormous palette of colors," she remarks. "A lot of players don't make use of them, but if you do, it opens up an extraordinary sensory world and you are complementing and engaging the music you are expressing."

NEW COMPOSITIONS AND CROSSOVERS

Along with the pieces by Brouwer and Tan Dun mentioned above, many contemporary composers, including Richard Danielpour, Lukas Foss, Joan Tower, and Joseph Schwanter, have dedicated pieces to Isbin. On the list of 80-plus works composed for her is music for solo guitar and guitar in combination with other instruments or voice. The inventory includes at least a dozen concertos, many of which she has performed with more than 200 orchestras across the globe.

In January of 2024, Isbin will premiere the *Miami Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra* by composer Karen LeFrak. "It's in a Latin-pop style that utilizes Cuban and other Latin American rhythms, combining them in a way I love that will have popular appeal," she says. "I premiered the first movement on the lawn of the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., with the National Symphony Orchestra. We are still formulating plans to record it."

Isbin frequently ventures into other forms of music in collaboration with celebrated artists working in jazz, pop, rock, folk, bluegrass, film, and world music. Her first crossover project, *Guitarjam*, was a trio she formed in 1984 with jazz guitarist Larry Coryell and multifaceted Brazilian guitarist Laurindo Almeida. Since then, a short list of her fellow adventurers onstage and on record includes

rock guitar heroes Steve Vai and Steve Morse, Brazilian percussionist Thiago de Mello, banjoist Alison Brown, fiddler Mark O'Connor, and vocalists Joan Baez, Nancy Wilson, Sting, and Josh Groban.

Perhaps her most audacious project is Strings for Peace, with Indian sarod master Amjad Ali Khan and his sons Amaan and Ayaan Ali Bangash, and tabla player Amit Kavthekar. Amjad Ali Khan composed and/or arranged ragas for the group's eponymous 2020 album and tours, and Isbin successfully set about adapting her musical voice for a dialogue in a non-Western musical vocabulary.

"Each crossover project has required a different focus stylistically, and I apply myself 1,000 percent to absorbing as much as I can to be in the right time zone and solar system when I play with these amazing people," Isbin says. "I wasn't expecting these projects; they

'Something I find so special about the guitar is the possibility of an enormous palette of colors!'

—SHARON ISBIN

landed in my lap. If I am moved by another artist and their work and am asked to play with them, I will do anything to meet them on that level to create something new that's inspiring for us both."

FORGING AHEAD

While Isbin has covered much ground geographically and stylistically, she's maintained the edge in her playing. "My hands are actually faster now," she says. "I've found ways to increase technique, and I love the challenge of trying to become better tomorrow than I was yesterday. I've played some of the music I presented at my GFA concert for a long time and approached it with totally new ears, seeking new nuances. I find new things all the time, and that's what keeps the music fresh."

When asked about sustaining the con brio tempo of her long and extraordinary career, she reveals that she is modifying the pace. "I don't

feel the need to always race around the world playing in this country one day and that country the next. I've done that all my life. I've learned the value of getting eight hours of sleep, which enables me to focus with even more clarity on the tasks at hand," she says.

Isbin has always been health conscious and was wearing face masks on flights long before the pandemic. Consequently, she hasn't had a cold in seven years and never got Covid. She also enjoys exercise. "One advantage of being from my generation is that I've learned to love physical activity and sports," she con-

tinues. "I love cross-country skiing and jogging. Rigorous exercise in the outdoors makes me feel like I am still 23 years old. I have that energy."

That energy continues to drive Isbin forward. "It feels like I am still riding an incredible magic carpet through the air, being fascinated by new discoveries along the way," she reflects. "I don't have any physical ailments. As long as my fingers work well and I stay totally healthy, it's possible to find a remarkably long trajectory ahead for the things I'm passionate about." **AC**

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SUSTAINABLE TONE

How guitar makers are responding to climate and supply threats—and the opportunities to make the guitar an instrument of change

By Emile Menasché

Rosewood, maple, spruce, mahogany, ebony: If you played or built acoustic guitars before the end of the last century, those woods would probably have covered almost all species under your fingers. Alternatives like cedar and koa were used for specific instrument types or for creative design choices related to appearance and tone.

But look at the specs in some recent *Acoustic Guitar* reviews and you're likely to see materials that would have seemed exotic even ten years ago: eucalyptus, sapele, bamboo, korina, Richlite, just to name a few. The use of these and other nontraditional materials is part of an effort by manufacturers to find alterna-

tives to traditional tonewoods in a world where climate change and deforestation are no longer abstract problems but part of our everyday lives.

How are acoustic guitar makers addressing these challenges? How are they adapting traditional designs in the face of climate change? How does one make a carbon neutral guitar? Because the answers to those questions are as varied as the manufacturers themselves, we won't attempt to be comprehensive. Instead, the following article looks at how some of the biggest builders in the industry are developing their own strategies—and possibly setting a template for others to follow.

A CRISIS IN OLD GROWTH

When C.F. Martin and Co. was founded, in 1833, the idea that trees would ever be in short supply in the Americas was simply unfathomable. With European colonization creating global empires by the middle of the 19th century, the natural resources of Africa and Asia made supplies seem even more limitless. This perception carried well into the postcolonial era of the 20th century.

“For 200 years, buying wood for musical instruments was pretty easy,” says Scott Paul, director of natural resource sustainability at Taylor Guitars. “It was all old growth, it was pretty well priced, and you could buy it locally.”

The environmental landscape has changed mightily over the last few decades. Deforestation is just one example of how human activity has literally altered the face of the Earth. “Today, the process of buying almost every wood for musical instruments—traditional tonewoods, newer tonewoods—is getting increasingly complicated, either because of international regulations and policy or deforestation,” Paul says.

While the dangers of overharvesting have long been recognized—not least because of the effects it has on carbon in the atmosphere—the U.N. says “global deforestation continues at an alarming rate.” The places where the problem is most acute often happen

to be where some of the most traditional tonewoods come from: Africa, South Asia, Oceania, and South and Central America.

Sourcing wood is important for many industries, but instrument making requires much more specific materials. Woods that work well for construction of furniture aren’t necessarily going to deliver the goods for a guitar, violin, or drum.

And guitars are in demand. According to a report by Australia’s *Cosmos* magazine on the guitar industry’s use of wood, more than 2.6 million new guitars were sold globally in 2022—with much of their material coming from old-growth trees sourced from six continents.

“Habitat destruction for agriculture and urbanization led to Brazilian rosewood—once considered the ‘gold standard’ for guitars—being effectively banned from use since 1992,” *Cosmos* reports. “Guitar companies replaced it with similar species from other places, but they too were overharvested.”

While the guitar industry uses a small percentage of the wood being harvested, its very specific needs mean it feels the lack of supply more than industries where alternative materials are easier to use.

SUSTAINABLE STRATEGIES

The *Cosmos* article cites Martin and Taylor as two major companies working to try to solve

the problem through reforestation, experimenting with alternative materials, and developing new construction techniques that make better use of available resources.

The quest to alleviate pressure on traditional resources isn’t exactly new—I remember reviewing a Martin OMC made of birch in the early 2000s—but according to Martin CEO Thomas Ripsam, companies are now looking at sustainability from a more strategic standpoint.

“Martin was actually the first to get FSC [Forest Stewardship Council] certified among the guitar makers,” Ripsam says. “We had lots of different efforts in the company. But we didn’t have a full picture of what we were doing, why we were doing it, and what our priorities should be.”

“So last year, we defined sustainability for Martin,” he continues, “and it includes three components: environment, community, and employees. It’s a very complex piece of work trying to figure out what is the carbon footprint of a guitar. Then we also did a full carbon footprint analysis for our entire company.” Martin now publishes an annual impact report available on its website. Taylor’s sustainability policies are also online (taylorguitars.com/about/sustainability).

The environmental side of the equation is the one most visible across the industry, and it’s the impetus for change among a growing number of manufacturers. “The harbingers of forest destruction for a manufacturer are when you see changes in price, quality, and geography—I can’t get from this country and get into that country,” says Paul, who worked on deforestation issues for Greenpeace before being hired by Taylor in what he believes is an industry-first role.

“If you start seeing all those three things, then resources are stressed,” he continues. “And everywhere we look, we’re seeing changes. After 200 years of status quo, over [the last] five or six years, Bob Taylor and [Taylor master guitar designer and ownership partner] Andy Powers will both say, ‘Yeah, it’s changing.’”

Those changes may mean that the models people consider definitive and traditional—the Martin D-28s and Gibson J-45s—may have to either adapt or give way to new alternatives. Ripsam says part of the sustainability effort includes educating customers about the opportunities afforded by new instruments. “We embrace alternatives without letting go of some of the things that are very important to Martin, like tone and aesthetics,” he says. “We’re never going to jeopardize that.”

Another effort is to make sure that the materials come from legal sources. The Yamaha Group has “established a due diligence system



COURTESY OF TAYLOR GUITARS



Sitka spruce in the wild (left) and as a guitar top

to prevent the procurement of timber from illegal sources,” according to an article on sustainability on the company’s website. Yamaha, which also offers a downloadable sustainability report, “promotes a strict confirmation process for the legality of timber harvesting” and “is expanding the use of certified timber, which is produced in socially and economically sustainable forests and contributes to the advancement of the community.”

Educating players is an important aspect of moving forward, Ripsam points out. “As we see the younger generation becoming guitarists, they have a totally different outlook on and approach to topics like sustainability,” he says. “They expect you to do things that are much more [environmentally] responsible.”

One example from Martin is the FSC-certified OM Biosphere, which the company calls “the second plastic-free guitar in production today.” In 2019, Gibson launched its Sustainable series with version of models like the J-45, L-00, and Hummingbird made of tonewoods—including

Sitka spruce tops and walnut backs and sides—sustainably harvested entirely in North America.

Paul believes that Taylor—a company founded in 1974 as an upstart taking on the traditional giants like Martin and Gibson—has an easier time introducing unconventional models to its customer base. “Taylor has a tradition of innovation,” Paul says. “So our customers are okay if we change the bracing or if we change the design and build. As Andy [Powers] says, ‘You don’t know what you can build until you know what you can build it from.’ And if the resources change, then the design may have to adapt to that changing environment.”

Taylor’s Urban Ash instruments (currently available in the GT and 300 series) use wood recycled from trees salvaged from the urban canopy in California.

SHARING IDEAS

While manufacturers do discuss these issues—and the music industry trade group NAMM has

launched a Sustainability Task Force—both Paul and Ripsam note that there is currently no industry-wide approach to sustainability outside of practices imposed by regulations.

“It’s very much an independent, company-driven approach, but of course, there’s dialogue,” Ripsam says. “It’s a challenge we all face. There are some other companies, like Yamaha, who have also been really good at establishing very clear objectives and a clear framework [for] how they think about sustainability.” He adds that Martin is also looking for “black swans”—builders who are trying completely new approaches.

“There is a much greater awareness across the industry, and you see important changes,” Paul says. “Bob Taylor likes to say that over the course of his career he’s walked through the threshold of ‘the way it’s always been,’ with [what were then considered] unlimited old growth forests, to ‘how it has to be,’ with new government regulations and scarcer resources.”



COURTESY OF MARTIN GUITAR

Left to right: walnut, Richlite, and striped ebony are some of the alternative materials that Martin is exploring.

When a big company has success with an alternative material, it can open the door for its competitors to try a similar idea. “I think one of the classic examples is when we introduced variegated ebony fingerboards,” Paul says, recalling lessons learned when Taylor became partners in an ebony mill in the Congo Basin.

“Nobody knows what percentage of ebony trees have a pure black heart and what percentage are variegated, but let’s say it’s 50/50,” he continues. “Traditionally, trees would be felled, and if they didn’t have a black heart, they would be left on the forest floor. Some quick math and common sense tell you that 50 percent of the ebony trees that have been felled in the Congo Basin since the mid-20th century, when industrial logging got going, were left to rot on the forest floor. When we realized that there’s no mechanical or acoustic difference between black and variegated ebony, we introduced variegated ebony on the 814, our flagship model.”

Ripsam notes that it’s important to work with local populations in regions where wood is harvested. Like Taylor, Martin takes part in reforestation efforts. “When we use tonewoods that are challenged from a sustainability perspective, we also look for opportunities to protect the environment and support communities and reforestation efforts in places like Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Congo,” Ripsam says.

“We look at all the materials that we use and try to get a very good handle on where they come from, of course, and which of these materials face issues from a sustainability perspective and an availability perspective,” he adds. “And we have efforts underway to look for alternatives.” One example is Richlite, a sustainable material made from paper, as an alternative to ebony.

In addition to seeking new materials, companies can use a higher percentage of the materials they procure. “An effort closer to home is to make sure that we use resources to the

max,” Ripsam says. “Historically, you had certain gradings for wood and hardwood and maybe used just the top-graded woods. Now we’re branching out more.”

As another example of minimizing scrap, Ripsam cites Martin’s experiments with four-piece rather than two-piece tops—just to make better use of available materials. Similarly, the new Taylor Builder’s Edition 814ce uses a four-piece Adirondack spruce top.

Using wood from closer to home is another opportunity, Paul notes, citing the example of Taylor’s Urban Ash series. “Bob [Taylor] asked me to look into urban wood and is it theoretically possible to source discarded, destined-for-the-landfill urban trees in a way that wasn’t kind of a one-off eco-marketing ploy,” Paul says. The question was whether these urban wood supplies had the quality, quantity, and predictability to produce a series of instruments.

“It’s a long story but it all worked out,” Paul says. “Now, we’re using shamel ash [sometimes

known as Mexican ash] and red iron bark eucalyptus, along with other species that were previously used, like walnut and Tasmanian blackwood. We still get those from traditional sources, but now we're augmenting our source from the urban California landscape."

PROACTIVE V. REACTIVE

The key to all these sustainability efforts is to be proactive instead of reactive. "That may mean moving beyond some traditions," Ripsam says. "We can see it already; the challenge is already there. Genuine mahogany availability is getting spottier, for example. And if we only

While the guitar industry uses a small percentage of the wood being harvested, its very specific needs mean it feels the lack of supply more than industries where alternative materials are easier to use.

react, I think some companies will be very surprised how quickly a challenge turns into a real problem."

Paul says the big companies are so active because they're the ones who come up against the three harbingers of price, availability, and quality, where smaller builders may only notice price. And with a range of pressures affecting the wood supply, change is inevitable.

"We're always talking about what we see coming in terms of supply and demand and quality and regulation," Paul says. "Another one of Bob Taylor's expressions is that the easiest day to buy wood to build guitars is today—because tomorrow is going to be harder." **AC**



COURTESY OF D'ADDARIO

RESTRINGING

While much of the focus on sustainability has been on wood and the use of plastics, guitars also use metals for frets. But when it comes to the demand for metal, strings may be the greatest source of concern.

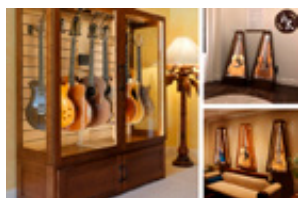
Unlike frets, strings are routinely discarded and most end up in the trash. Some may get thrown into the same recycling bin as beer cans, but there's no way of knowing how much of that material simply ends up in landfill.

Enter D'Addario's Playback program (learn more at daddario.com/playback/recycle). Launched in 2016, this partnership with TerraCycle has recycled over 11.5 million strings to date, according to D'Addario's Natalie Morrison. Players can mail in used strings for recycling or, in many locations, drop them at a local music store. "Playback accepts all brands of strings to recycle in the program—from guitar to orchestral," she says. "In addition, Martin and Taylor guitars have joined as supporting sponsors."

As with wood, eliminating waste is a priority for making sustainable strings. "As far as sourcing metals, D'Addario always tries to find ways to utilize our wire mill to full capacity," Morrison says. "We've been purchasing precious metals in forms of rod to draw down all of our sizes needed into spools such as high carbon and stainless steel, nickel, silver-plated copper, brass (80/20), and various other alloys. Here we can control our quality, consistency, waste management, and safe inventory levels by not over- or under-producing, so we're not overflowing our warehouse while at the same time having enough to make sure our dealers and loyal players get strings on time." —EM

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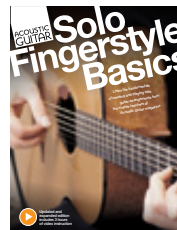
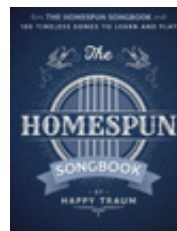
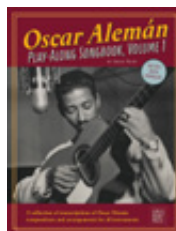
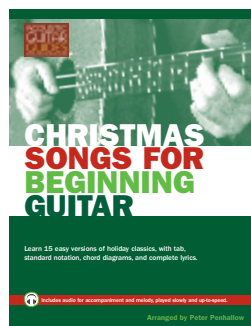
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NEW!

HERE'S HOW



TECHVATION/UNSPLASH

Session in Progress

A guide to getting started with home recording

BY DOUG YOUNG

Recording your music can be exciting, and with today's technology, it doesn't necessarily require going into a professional studio. With a relatively modest budget and a bit of time invested learning the ropes, you can make satisfying recordings at home, whether you want to release them commercially or just share with friends. In this guide, we'll explore a few steps you can take to start recording yourself on a modest budget.

1 IDENTIFY YOUR NEEDS AND BUDGET

Before making any purchases, consider your goals and how you plan to work. Most home recordists tend to keep things simple, using one or two microphones and a two-channel recording interface. The essential components of any recording setup include a microphone or two, a preamp/digital interface to get sound

into a computer or other recording device, the recorder itself, and speakers or headphones to listen to the results. You can either opt for self-contained recording devices that provide all of these in a single unit or assemble the individual components yourself.

2 LEVERAGE WHAT YOU HAVE

Many smartphones and tablets support apps that can make surprisingly sophisticated recordings, including capturing multiple tracks, mixing, and adding effects. You can start by using your device's built-in microphones and later upgrade to an external mic like the Shure MV88+ (\$199 street).

Adding an external preamp/interface like the PreSonus AudioBox iTwo (\$89.99) allows you to upgrade to higher-quality external microphones, perhaps a pair of small condenser mics like the sE Electronics sE7 (\$109)

or even a studio staple like the Shure SM81 (\$399). Don't forget that buying used on a website like Reverb or eBay is a great way to make your budget go further.

If you own a laptop or desktop computer, you will just need to add an audio interface and microphones. You may already have recording software—Macs come with GarageBand preinstalled. Alternatively, you can use free recording software like Audacity or shareware like Reaper (\$60) for both Macs and PCs. If you're a performing musician, you likely already have mic stands and microphones that can be used for recording.

3 START SIMPLE AND GROW AS YOU LEARN

Learning to record is an ongoing process—and technique generally matters more than gear. Instead of buying everything you think

you need upfront, try gaining hands-on experience with what you have first. You can learn a lot by making simple recordings with your smartphone.

Another option is to get a portable all-in-one recording device, like the Tascam DR-05X (\$99) and DR-40X (\$199), or Zoom H4n (\$199), which even include built-in microphones. Think of these as point-and-shoot cameras: just hit the record button and play. Some of these devices can also function as an audio interface to a computer, allowing you to continue using them as your needs grow.

4 BEWARE THE PENNY-WISE AND POUND-FOOLISH TRAP

It might be tempting to buy the least expensive options available, but it's important to consider your ultimate goals. Purchasing low-quality gear may lead to a cycle of upgrades that cost more in the long run than investing in a quality piece of equipment from the beginning. When you're starting out, try to find the sweet spot between low-quality gear that you may outgrow and items that are overkill for your needs.

5 LEVERAGE EXPERT EXPERTISE

Whether you're trying to learn techniques or deciding what gear to buy, advice from experienced individuals can be immensely helpful. Online forums dedicated to recording, such as HomeRecording.com, GearSpace.com, or the Recording section of AcousticGuitarForum.com, offer good places to ask questions. And of course, AG's back issues and website include plenty of articles that offer tips on recording, with a focus on acoustic instruments.

Additionally, your local community college might offer recording classes, possibly including access to a well-equipped recording studio. Booking some time in a professional studio can also be a worthwhile investment as a learning experience. While recording a song or two, observe everything and ask questions.

6 FOCUS ON THE BASICS

While it's easy to get excited about microphones, recording software, and effects, there are more mundane factors that can make or break your recordings. Room acoustics significantly impact the quality of your recordings and are one of the biggest advantages professional studios have over home recording environments. A well-furnished room can often suffice for amateur recordings, but you won't know how your room sounds until you try. You can use your phone or one of the portable recorders mentioned above to make test re-

cordings in different locations and find the best sound. If you find that you need to invest in room acoustics, GIK (gikacoustics.com) and ATS (atsacoustics.com) offer reasonably affordable and aesthetically pleasing room treatment options.

Another often overlooked piece of gear is monitors or headphones. Properly evaluating your sound requires the ability to hear your recordings accurately. Get the best monitors your budget allows. If your room acoustics are poor, you may achieve better mixes with a quality pair of headphones.

While microphones definitely play a big role in your sound, the differences become subtle beyond a certain medium price point. A \$1,000 mic is not necessarily ten times better than one costing only \$100, and in a home recording environment, you might not notice a significant difference.

Similarly, preamps and computer interfaces are often hyped in near-mythical terms in online forums, but beginners in a home recording environment are unlikely to notice the difference between a solid entry-level interface

like the Audient iD14 (\$299) or the Focusrite Scarlett 2i2 (\$189) and a multi-thousand-dollar high-end unit.

When planning your budget, don't forget about mic cables, stands, and other extras. In most cases, you won't hear a significant difference between a good basic mic cable from monoprice.com and a high-end option that costs ten times as much. Mic stands can also consume a surprising portion of your budget. On-Stage makes good basic stands at reasonable prices. For recording guitar while seated, a low-profile drum mic stand like the MS7411B (\$45) can be a space-efficient solution.

7 HAVE FUN

The best thing about recording at home is that you're in control. You can record whatever you like, whenever you like, without watching the clock. No one needs to hear the bad takes but you, and you are free to follow your creative instincts. Recording is a skill that takes time to learn, just like playing an instrument, so enjoy the learning process and the journey. **AG**

BILL EVANS



Recording software such as Audacity is a nice free option.



COURTESY OF JANE MILLER

Just Duet

Work on your sight-reading skills through two-part studies

BY JANE MILLER

THE PROBLEM:

You are either unfamiliar with reading standard musical notation altogether or would like to improve your sight-reading.

THE SOLUTION:

Get together with another guitarist who also wants to practice reading skills by playing together in real time.

Hundreds of years ago, J.S. Bach famously composed his two-part inventions for his students to study composition and counterpoint. These pieces have become standard repertoire for not just pianists but guitar students as well. In fact, any music written in treble clef can be fun to try for guitarists wanting to improve their reading skills—I especially like working from clarinet books.

Those who want to work on their single-line melody reading would do well to use the experiential advantage of playing with a partner to have fun and practice. For this introductory lesson, I have composed some duets that will help both you and a fellow player strengthen your reading skills.

1 CRACK THE CODE

The music here is only shown in standard notation, without the tablature that you see in most music in this magazine. You can identify the fret position by the number on which your first (index) finger falls. The position is written above the staff using Roman numerals; so II indicates that your first finger is on the second fret, followed by fingers 2, 3, and 4 on frets 3, 4, and 5, respectively.

Example 1 shows the G that sits on the top line of the staff. Since that note can of course

appear on the guitar in a few places, it's helpful to have suggestions from the page. The circled number is the string number, so (1) is the first, or high E, string. The numbers without circles represent fretting hand fingers, so 2 means your second (middle) finger plays that note. With solid clues like this, who needs tablature?

We'll play in the guitar-friendly key of G major for these examples. **Example 2** shows where to find two F# notes in second position, one high and the other low. Notice the string numbers and fingerings that will guide you right to the correct spots: string 1, fret 2, and string 4, fret 4. Once you get on a roll reading a line, you won't need these indications every time. They usually turn up just when needed to solve a guitaristic puzzle.

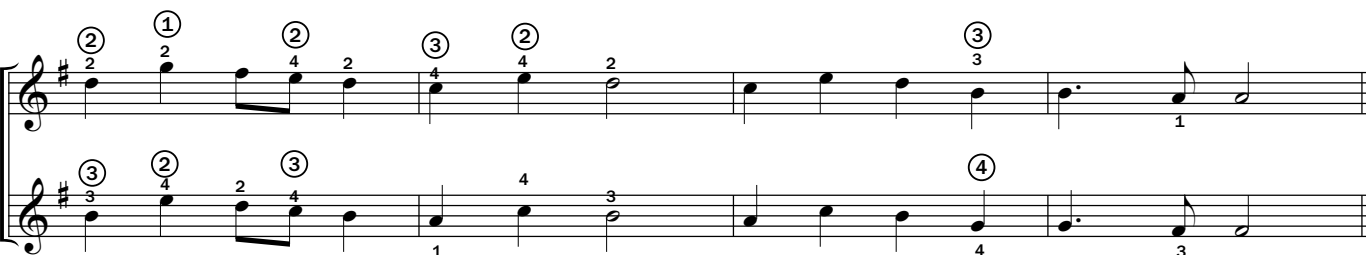
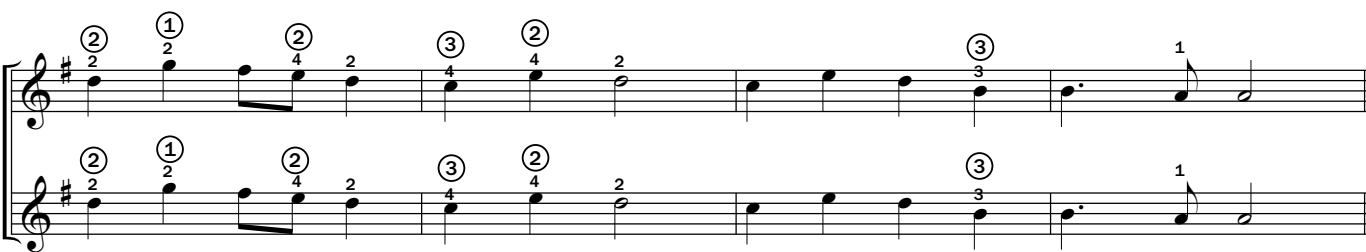
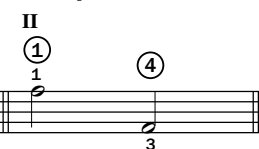
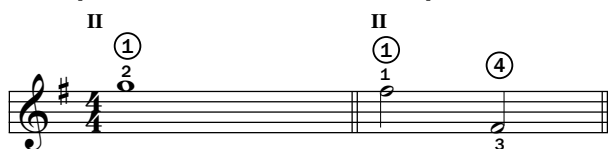
2 IN IT TOGETHER

There's nothing like playing in real time

While the goal is to play together through the piece, you might take turns carrying the ball for the other as needed until you both have it down comfortably. The most important part of this practice is to keep time and move forward no matter what happens—just as in real life. Practicing on your own can include repeating sections and going back to fix things.

3 The interval of a third is a common and pleasing sound for harmonies used by singers and instrumentalists. **Example 4** has the same melody as Ex. 3 in the first part, while the second line is a third below. You can see that the starting notes of the two parts are D and B; the harmony line is lower in this case. Notice that the rhythms are still identical. Listen to each other as you play, feeling the beat together and keeping true to those rhythms. At the same time, you'll be getting used to trusting your own reading, as each part has its own melody notes.

For individual practice, you could make a quick recording of the first part (voice memo on your phone works just fine for this) and then practice playing the second part along with the recording. In a follow-up lesson, we'll be venturing into counterpoint lines, with each part in different rhythms and sometimes completing each other's sentences. **AG**



Example 5: "Duetttes"

Measures 1-4 of the piece "Duetttes". The key signature is one sharp (F#). The notation is for a piano duet, with two staves. Fingerings are indicated by circled numbers 1-4. Measure 1: Treble clef has a quarter note D4 (finger 2), a quarter note E4 (finger 1), and a quarter note F#4 (finger 2). Bass clef has a quarter note D3 (finger 3), a quarter note E3 (finger 2), and a quarter note F#3 (finger 3). Measure 2: Treble clef has a quarter note G4 (finger 4), a quarter note A4 (finger 2), and a quarter note B4 (finger 2). Bass clef has a quarter note G3 (finger 1), a quarter note A3 (finger 4), and a quarter note B3 (finger 3). Measure 3: Treble clef has a quarter note C5 (finger 4), a quarter note B4 (finger 2), and a quarter note A4 (finger 2). Bass clef has a quarter note C4 (finger 1), a quarter note B3 (finger 4), and a quarter note A3 (finger 3). Measure 4: Treble clef has a quarter note G4 (finger 3), a quarter note F#4 (finger 3), and a quarter note E4 (finger 1). Bass clef has a quarter note G3 (finger 4), a quarter note F#3 (finger 4), and a quarter note E3 (finger 3).

Measures 5-8 of the piece "Duetttes". Measure 5: Treble clef has a quarter note D4 (finger 5), a quarter note E4 (finger 4), and a quarter note F#4 (finger 3). Bass clef has a quarter note D3 (finger 3), a quarter note E3 (finger 2), and a quarter note F#3 (finger 2). Measure 6: Treble clef has a quarter note G4 (finger 2), a quarter note A4 (finger 2), and a quarter note B4 (finger 2). Bass clef has a quarter note G3 (finger 1), a quarter note A3 (finger 4), and a quarter note B3 (finger 3). Measure 7: Treble clef has a quarter note C5 (finger 2), a quarter note B4 (finger 2), and a quarter note A4 (finger 2). Bass clef has a quarter note C4 (finger 1), a quarter note B3 (finger 4), and a quarter note A3 (finger 3). Measure 8: Treble clef has a quarter note G4 (finger 2), a quarter note F#4 (finger 2), and a quarter note E4 (finger 2). Bass clef has a quarter note G3 (finger 1), a quarter note F#3 (finger 4), and a quarter note E3 (finger 3).

Measures 9-12 of the piece "Duetttes". Measure 9: Treble clef has a quarter note D4 (finger 2), a quarter note E4 (finger 2), and a quarter note F#4 (finger 2). Bass clef has a quarter note D3 (finger 3), a quarter note E3 (finger 2), and a quarter note F#3 (finger 2). Measure 10: Treble clef has a quarter note G4 (finger 2), a quarter note A4 (finger 2), and a quarter note B4 (finger 2). Bass clef has a quarter note G3 (finger 1), a quarter note A3 (finger 4), and a quarter note B3 (finger 3). Measure 11: Treble clef has a quarter note C5 (finger 2), a quarter note B4 (finger 2), and a quarter note A4 (finger 2). Bass clef has a quarter note C4 (finger 1), a quarter note B3 (finger 4), and a quarter note A3 (finger 3). Measure 12: Treble clef has a quarter note G4 (finger 2), a quarter note F#4 (finger 2), and a quarter note E4 (finger 2). Bass clef has a quarter note G3 (finger 1), a quarter note F#3 (finger 4), and a quarter note E3 (finger 3).

Measures 13-16 of the piece "Duetttes". Measure 13: Treble clef has a quarter note D4 (finger 2), a quarter note E4 (finger 2), and a quarter note F#4 (finger 2). Bass clef has a quarter note D3 (finger 3), a quarter note E3 (finger 2), and a quarter note F#3 (finger 2). Measure 14: Treble clef has a quarter note G4 (finger 2), a quarter note A4 (finger 2), and a quarter note B4 (finger 2). Bass clef has a quarter note G3 (finger 1), a quarter note A3 (finger 4), and a quarter note B3 (finger 3). Measure 15: Treble clef has a quarter note C5 (finger 2), a quarter note B4 (finger 2), and a quarter note A4 (finger 2). Bass clef has a quarter note C4 (finger 1), a quarter note B3 (finger 4), and a quarter note A3 (finger 3). Measure 16: Treble clef has a quarter note G4 (finger 2), a quarter note F#4 (finger 2), and a quarter note E4 (finger 2). Bass clef has a quarter note G3 (finger 1), a quarter note F#3 (finger 4), and a quarter note E3 (finger 3).



Gretchen Menn



DANIELE GOTTARDO

Tremolo Primer

Getting started with the essential classical technique

BY GRETCHEN MENN

Andrés Segovia's version of the iconic Tárrega piece "Recuerdos de la Alhambra" was love at first listen for me. Even with ears accustomed to the polyphony that abounds in classical guitar repertoire, I found the effect fascinating—not just for the clarity of the separate voices, but for the long, seemingly sustained melody notes accompanied by arpeggios in the lower and middle range.

The guitar doesn't allow for sustained notes the way wind or bowed instruments do. We can't increase the dynamic of a note once plucked, and sustaining a note is a delicate process that requires a host of other considerations to be effective: a certain amount of volume, often harmonic support through other strings in sympathetic vibration, and a lack of upstaging the sustained note through the plucking of other notes that divert the ear's attention. Yet in "Recuerdos," the melody grows and eases dynamically, taking on a characteristic that is outside what we expect to hear from a guitar.

This magic is the result of the tremolo technique—a rapid reattacking of a note to give the impression of a sustained voice. The result defies some of the inherent limitations of a plucked instrument. Though it is commonly associated with classical guitar, the technique can be used on steel-string acoustic or even electric guitar.

I am by no standards an expert at classical tremolo. What I am is an eager student who spends time working on the technique, and perhaps I can convey this first part of the path in a way that will be approachable for those curious to explore more.

What follows are some examples that I have been using to develop the technique. These are standard tremolo exercises, and I must give credit to my teacher and mentor, Phillip de Fremery, as well as two of my brilliant classical guitarist friends, Evan Taucher and Jiji, for some of these ideas and valuable instruction.

If you are new to tremolo, keep in mind this is an advanced technique that takes

some time for even experienced players to develop. I recommend working very slowly and getting some real-time feedback from an knowledgeable instructor.

NAILS OR NO NAILS

Many have strong feelings about this dilemma. Those with nails insist they are an imperative part of their sound and technique. I am happy with the tone I get without them and am spared the stress and time of nail maintenance. Additionally, some of the tapping techniques I do on electric guitar don't work with nails. You can find compelling arguments from both schools, though using nails is certainly more common today. I say do your thing—you don't need to grow or cut your nails for this.

THE MOVEMENT

If you are new to classical guitar technique, the biggest issue I have seen for most steel-string or electric players is the origin of the movement—it should come from your first

knuckle, in more of a sweeping than a pulling motion. It's like waving, as I demonstrate in the accompanying video. To be sure, you don't have to be a classical player to use tremolo, but as it is a classical technique, it is only logical to look there to examine how it works.

First try **Example 1**, which involves the ring, middle, and index fingers plucking the open high E string, and then **Example 2**, which enlists the thumb on the low E string. An important point is to relax after each movement—think of dumping any tension out of your hand as soon as you pluck the string.

After you've learned the first two examples as written, repeat Ex. 2 and try to prepare each finger: place the next one you are going to use on the string you are going to play immediately after the preceding note is played. This will give a staccato sound on the repeated notes. Go very slowly at first, aiming for balance of tone.

In order to achieve evenness of volume between each of the picking-hand fingers, it can be helpful to work with accents, as shown in **Examples 3a–c**, starting with the ring finger. Intentionally bringing out one note ensures deeper listening and hones your dynamic control. This then allows you to perceive when notes are unintentionally out of balance, thereby leading to more refined tremolo.

Once you've spent time working slowly through each of these examples, go back to Ex. 2 and listen more deeply, making tiny adjustments for balance of tone and dynamics so each finger produces a sound consistent

with the others. The aim is to avoid a galloping effect that results from some notes being over- or underplayed relative to the others.

As for other tips, I was fortunate to get some words of wisdom from the phenomenal Jiji, who is an expert on tremolo. She suggested working in dotted rhythms, similar in principle to Exs. 3a–c, but rather than accenting a note dynamically, elongate one note while shortening others. The concept here is the same—by exaggerating unevenness, you build greater control and perception, which makes your tremolo more even.

Jiji did warn that overly metronomic tremolo can draw attention to itself, rather than give the desired impression of sustained notes. Therefore, work on fluidity, dynamics, and shape. She suggested enlisting a practice buddy who can speed up and slow down your metronome as you play, so you can work on a natural ebb and flow in your tremolo.

As a final word of caution, Jiji mentioned to watch out for the tendency to overplay notes with the thumb.

TREMOLO IN CONTEXT

Now let's add some accompaniment. In **Example 4**, we are fretting an open A-minor chord, keeping the repeated notes on the high E string. Keep going with preparing the next fingers, and work to differentiate the two lines.

If you are new to tremolo, investing some real time through exercises like these is essential for cultivating a strong foundation. As with any practice, quality of time spent is what

counts. In the early phases of developing a new technique, it is especially important to go *very* slowly, ensuring your perception stays ahead of your technical execution so you cultivate good habits. Proceeding slowly will expedite the learning process and perhaps save you from the immensely frustrating situation of realizing you've spent hours, days, weeks, or even months cementing a faulty technique.

I'll leave you with an excerpt from an etude I composed for myself to work on this technique (**Example 5**). Though quite a jump in difficulty from the initial exercises, the same principles apply. I suggest working in very small sections, focusing on quality of tone, dynamic control, and consistency of the tremolo. Start by using a click at a very slow tempo, and once you achieve good tone quality and graceful, relaxed tremolo, increase the tempo slightly (only 1–5 bpm).

Stretch your ears so you perceive the separate voices, and make tiny adjustments to enhance them with subtleties in your playing. As Jiji advises, be careful not to exaggerate the bass notes. Once you are comfortable with the first arpeggio, work on a smooth transition between it and the second arpeggio. You'll have no looming spirit of Segovia or Tárrega as you make your early attempts, as this piece is new and so far only played by me—again, a student of this technique. Consider me your study buddy.

Enjoy and work with fearless patience. Always wishing you my very best with all your musical studies and exploration. **AG**

Example 1

Example 2

Example 3a

Example 3b

*a = ring finger; m = middle; i = index; and p = thumb.

Example 3c

Example 4



Example 5: "Tremolo Prelude"

D⁶ **Gmaj9/B**

A⁷/E **Gmaj7** **Bm⁷/A**

C⁶ **Bm⁷**

A¹¹/C[#] **Em(add9)** **Aadd9**

D **Dadd9** **D**

Django Reinhardt



WILLIAM P. GOTTLIEB

Django Chords

Expand your harmonic vocabulary through voicings used by the legendary Gypsy jazz guitarist

BY GREG RUBY

Django Reinhardt had an unparalleled technique stemming from the most unfortunate of circumstances. On October 26, 1928, at the age of 18, the young guitarist returned home from a gig. As he entered his caravan, a candle fell over and set the place ablaze. While Reinhardt and his wife escaped, much of his body was badly burned.

Against the odds, he recovered, but it took over a year until he began playing the guitar again. With his third and fourth fingers permanently paralyzed, he only had mobility in his first and second fingers and thumb. A determined Reinhardt not only taught himself how to play guitar again but invented an unorthodox approach to chord voicings.

In this lesson, we'll dive into some of these chordal innovations that you can use to get a Reinhardt sound or to simply explore new ways of voicing chords.

WEEK ONE

Reinhardt relied heavily on his first and second fingers to play even the most basic triads. To do so, he would use a fingering

where the tip of one finger pushed down two adjacent strings at once at the same fret. Start with the Em in **Example 1** by playing the common fingering of the chord with your second and third fingers. Then, lift both fingers off the string and when you play it the second time, aim the tip of your second finger for the area in between the two strings. Maintain the arch of your finger and resist flattening your finger, especially if you are double-jointed. This may take some getting used to, so practice switching slowly between the two fingerings.

Once you get comfortable with the one-fingered Em, try the same technique on the Am chord in **Example 2**. This is nearly the same shape, only moved over a string with the first finger added on the second string. Once this chord becomes more familiar, try moving back and forth between Am and E (**Example 3**). You will notice the shape is identical, except it shifts over one string. Remember to aim your second finger in between the strings but land on both.

Once you can change back and forth with some ease, place these chords in waltz time with open-string bass notes that give you an extra beat to get back and forth (**Example 4**). Remember to wait to change the chord shape until the first beat of the next open string. Try giving it a little more Reinhardt flavor by using a rest stroke [see Ruby's Weekly Workout in the March/April 2023 issue —ed.] on the root note.

WEEK TWO

While Reinhardt's third and fourth fingers were paralyzed, preventing any dexterous movement, he could still maneuver and press them onto the fretboard for chording—typically on the top three strings. We will develop some chords using this technique, first building on last week's lesson to form a movable major sixth chord.

Follow the three sequential steps in **Example 5** by starting with the two-fingered E chord. Then, add a C# to make an E6. To mute the first string, let the pad of your third finger touch the first string while fretting the second string; to mute the sixth, wrap your thumb around the neck and touch the side of the string. In the coming weeks,

Beginners' Tip #1

When practicing the one-fingered Em chord in **Example 1**, pick the chord one note at a time to make sure that each note is ringing clearly.

Beginners' Tip #2

Instead of pressing harder with your fingers, think of your thumb as a counter lever and adjust its location to provide more support.



WEEK 1

Example 1

Example 1 shows six chords: Em, Em, Am, Am, Am, and E. Each chord is accompanied by a fretboard diagram and a corresponding musical staff notation. The fretboard diagrams show the fingerings for each chord: Em (023000), Em (022000), Am (x02310), Am (x02210), Am (x02210), and E (022100). The musical staff notation shows the chords in a sequence, with the first five chords in a 4/4 time signature and the last chord in a 3/4 time signature.

WEEK 2

Example 4

Example 4 shows five chords: Am, E, E, E6, and F6. Each chord is accompanied by a fretboard diagram and a corresponding musical staff notation. The fretboard diagrams show the fingerings for each chord: Am (x02210), E (022100), E (022100), E6 (x2213x), and F6 (x2213x). The musical staff notation shows the chords in a sequence, with the first four chords in a 4/4 time signature and the last chord in a 3/4 time signature.

Example 5

Example 6

Example 6 shows eight chords: F6, F#6, G6, Ab6, A6, Bb6, B6, and C6. Each chord is accompanied by a fretboard diagram and a corresponding musical staff notation. The fretboard diagrams show the fingerings for each chord: F6 (x2213x), F#6 (x2213x), G6 (x2213x), Ab6 (x2213x 5 fr.), A6 (x2213x 6 fr.), Bb6 (x2213x 7 fr.), B6 (x2213x 8 fr.), and C6 (x2213x 9 fr.). The musical staff notation shows the chords in a sequence, with the first four chords in a 4/4 time signature and the last four chords in a 3/4 time signature.

Example 7

Example 7 shows four chords: F6, C7, Bb6, and F7. Each chord is accompanied by a fretboard diagram and a corresponding musical staff notation. The fretboard diagrams show the fingerings for each chord: F6 (x2213x), C7 (2x13xx), Bb6 (x2213x 7 fr.), and F7 (2x13xx 7 fr.). The musical staff notation shows the chords in a sequence, with the first two chords in a 4/4 time signature and the last two chords in a 3/4 time signature.

Example 8

Example 9

Example 10

Example 8 shows two chords: D6 and D9. Each chord is accompanied by a fretboard diagram and a corresponding musical staff notation. The fretboard diagrams show the fingerings for each chord: D6 (x21133) and D9 (x2113x). The musical staff notation shows the chords in a sequence, with the first chord in a 4/4 time signature and the second chord in a 3/4 time signature.

we will begin using the thumb to add bass notes, but for now just let it touch enough to mute the string.

Once you have each note ringing clearly with the first and sixth strings muted, move the chord shape up one fret and voilà—F6. **Example 6** will help you get comfortable with this chord in all positions. Start with an F6 at the second fret and continue up the fretboard chromatically until you reach C6 at the ninth

fret. Visualize the root of this chord on the sixth string one fret below the first finger.

Now, let's place the major sixth chord into a progression. In **Example 7**, we have a I–V progression in the key of F. When traveling from the F6 to the C7, move the entire chord shape over one string and then mute the fifth string with your second finger. Release the tension in your left hand following each strum to deaden the chord. Start slowly and

gradually increase the tempo until you can control this at any speed.

In **Example 8**, use the same two shapes, but in a I–V progression in the key of B \flat at the seventh fret. **Example 9** introduces a D6/9 chord with the root on the fifth string. For this shape, use the pad of your first finger to press the third and fourth strings at the fourth fret, and the pad of your third finger on the first and second strings at the fifth fret. Sometimes,

Example 11

Example 11 shows a progression of A13/B \flat and D $_9^6$ chords. The guitar part shows the chord shapes and the bass part shows the fretting.

Example 12

Example 12 shows a progression of D $_9^6$ and A $_9$ chords. The guitar part shows the chord shapes and the bass part shows the fretting.

WEEK 3

Example 13

Example 13 shows a progression of A $_6$ and A $_9^6$ chords. The guitar part shows the chord shapes and the bass part shows the fretting.

Example 14

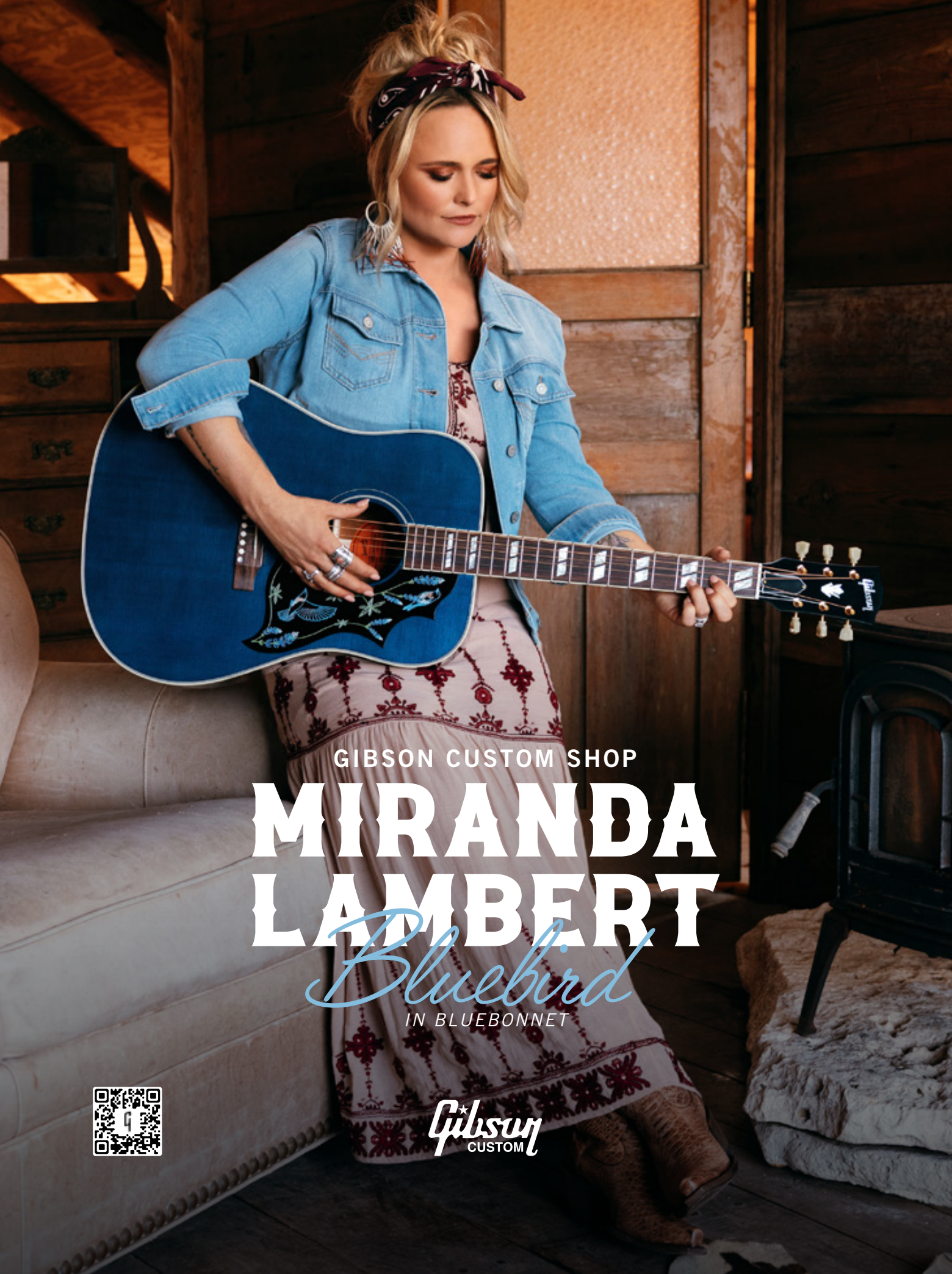
Example 14 shows a progression of A $_9^6$ and A $_6$ chords. The guitar part shows the chord shapes and the bass part shows the fretting.

Example 15

Example 15 shows a progression of A $_9^6$ and A m_9^6 chords. The guitar part shows the chord shapes and the bass part shows the fretting.

Example 16

Example 16 shows a progression of B \flat_6 , B $\flat m_6$, F $_9^6$, E $_7$, and F $_9^6$ chords. The guitar part shows the chord shapes and the bass part shows the fretting.



GIBSON CUSTOM SHOP

MIRANDA LAMBERT

Bluebird

IN BLUEBONNET



Gibson
CUSTOM

this chord is played without the first string, as shown in **Example 10**.

Now add an A13/B \flat chord in **Example 11** to create an accompaniment inspired by Reinhardt's composition "Django's Castle." Then, try out the I-V progression in **Example 12** using only the middle four strings, barring them with your first finger on the fourth fret for the A9 chord.

WEEK THREE

To provide the fullest sounds, Reinhardt would often play chords using all six strings. In order to achieve this, he would wrap his thumb around the top of the fretboard and play bass notes on the sixth string. Often referred to as "thumb chords," these shapes can provide a big rhythm sound and work very well for arpeggiated soloing ideas.

Let's build from Week Two by going through the three steps in **Example 13** to get into a thumb chord. First, play an A6 chord on the middle four strings at the sixth fret. Then, turn this chord into an A6/9—just add a B natural on the first string by flattening your

third finger across the first and second strings. Next, place your thumb on the fifth fret of the lowest string. The back of the neck should now be resting against the curvature of your hand. Adjust your third finger and thumb as needed and slowly relax the grip until you can play this without strain.

Reinhardt would often arpeggiate these chords in his solos, as on the A6/9 chord in **Example 14**. Use all rest strokes in a downward direction to get the fullest tone and most control. In **Example 15**, turn the A6/9 chord into an Am6/9 chord by lowering your first finger one fret. **Example 16** uses the thumb chord for rhythm accompaniment during the first eight measures of the chord progression to "I'll See You in My Dreams."

WEEK FOUR

An advantage of the thumb chord is that it frees up fingers for additions to your chord voicings. Reinhardt was able to place his third and fourth fingers onto the fretboard to create extensions and alterations for dominant seventh chords. **Example 17** demonstrates an A7 thumb chord at the fifth fret. To get into this shape, start by placing a common open-D form at the fifth fret on string set 2–4. Then, reach your thumb around the top of the fretboard and bend at the joint so that the distal phalanx is pressing the string at the fifth fret.

Example 18 builds on this idea by creating an ascending line at the top of the chord. Start with the A7 from the previous example,

and then add your fourth finger to the sixth fret on the second string to create an A7#5. Next, add an A to the top of the chord by placing your second finger on the first string at the fifth fret. Conclude this passage by removing your second and fourth fingers and barring your third finger across the sixth fret to create an A7alt chord.

This melodic chord idea is applied in the 13th measure of **Example 19** to an accompaniment similar to the classic song "Dark Eyes." In measures 1–4, notice how the A9 and Dm6 chords use the same shape, moved down two frets to create that progression from I (A9) to v (Dm6). Pay close attention to the fingerings here.

This lesson's chords demonstrate Reinhardt's ingenuity in relearning how to play the guitar with limited use of his fretting fingers—years before his meteoric rise to become one of the greatest jazz guitarists of all time. Whatever style you play, have fun with these ideas and use them to enhance any song in your repertoire. **AG**

Beginners' Tip #3

Look for a common finger between two chords. Consider it your anchor and hold it in place when moving between the chords.

Beginners' Tip #4

Try using the Reinhardt fingerings introduced in Week 1 for Em and Am chords on some of your favorite folk songs. You can then use your free fingers to add more color to the chord voicings.

TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

It's always handy to have snappy endings at your disposal. Try out this "shave and a haircut" outro using a Reinhardt chord moved around the neck. Play it as written, in the key of G major, and then try it in a variety of other keys.

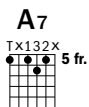
The musical notation shows a sequence of chords and their corresponding bass line fingerings:

- Chords:** D $_9$, C \sharp_9 , D $_9$, E \flat_9 , E $_9$, F $_9$, F \sharp_9 , G $_9$
- Fretboard Diagrams:** Each chord is shown with a fretboard diagram indicating the Reinhardt thumb chord shape (xx1133) and the fret number (4 fr. to 9 fr.).
- Bass Line:** The bottom staff shows the bass line with fingerings for the thumb and other fingers.

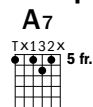


WEEK 4

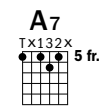
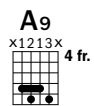
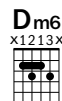
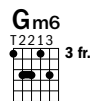
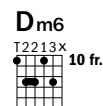
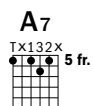
Example 17



Example 18



Example 19



Tracy Chapman



HANS HILLEWAERT

Fast Car

Learn Tracy Chapman's groundbreaking hit

BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS

In an era when synthesizers and hair bands ruled pop radio, Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car," from her 1988 self-titled debut, was a startling success—landing the 24-year-old folksinger a spot on the Top Ten and the Grammy stage. And 35 years later "Fast Car" broke ground yet again, as Luke Combs' reverent cover topped the country airplay chart in the summer of 2023, making Chapman the first Black woman with a sole writing credit for a No. 1 country song.

Even after all this time and many other covers (Passenger, Black Pumas, Jonas Blue), "Fast Car" feels as vital as ever. It is, especially, a brilliant piece of storytelling—a powerful narrative of a woman dreaming of escape from poverty, with a kind of realism

and emotional authenticity that few songwriters achieve.

"Fast Car" has a distinctive guitar part, too—it's a cousin of Paul McCartney's "Blackbird," with a melody line that moves up and down the second string over the drone of the open third string.

To play "Fast Car," capo at the second fret. The song uses key-of-G shapes (sounding in A with the capo), but no chord sequence in the verse or chorus ends on a G, so the harmony feels unresolved until you land on a G for the very last chord—an appropriate choice for a song about seeking elusive stability and comfort. Chapman suggests a subtle resolution in the closing lyrics too, as the narrator switches from wishing for escape with her partner earlier

in the song to telling him to "take your fast car and keep on driving."

The notation shows the eight-bar intro; the first two measures (which repeat) also serve as your verse accompaniment part and as the interludes throughout. Pick the down-stemmed notes with your thumb and the up-stemmed notes with your index and middle fingers. At the end of the first measure, slide your ring finger from the third fret up to the eighth for the Em.

In the chorus, use simple open shapes as shown in the chord library, and switch to a strum with your fingers. The chorus, and its dream of breaking through to a better life, passes quickly, and the song returns to its cyclical verse pattern—and to the day-to-day struggles that Chapman evokes so movingly. **AC**



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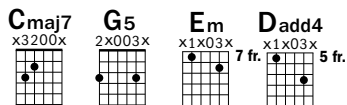
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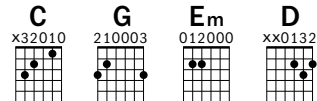


Chords, Capo II

Verse



Chorus



Intro

Cmaj7 **G5** **Em** **Dadd4**

Cmaj7 **G5** **Em** **Dadd4** **Cmaj7** **G5** **Em** **Dadd4**

Intro

Cmaj7 **G5** **Em** **Dadd4** play 4x

1. **Cmaj7** **G5**
You got a fast car

Em **Dadd4**
I want a ticket to anywhere

Cmaj7 **G5**
Maybe we make a deal

Em **Dadd4**
Maybe together we can get somewhere

Cmaj7 **G5**
Anyplace is better

Em **Dadd4**
Starting from zero, got nothing to lose

Cmaj7 **G5**
Maybe we'll make something

Em **Dadd4**
But me myself, I've got nothing to prove

2. **Cmaj7** **G5**
You got a fast car

Em **Dadd4**
And I got a plan to get us out of here

Cmaj7 **G5**
I been working at the convenience store

Em **Dadd4**
Managed to save just a little bit of money

Cmaj7 **G5**
We won't have to drive too far

Em **Dadd4**
Just 'cross the border and into the city

Cmaj7 **G5**
You and I can both get jobs

Em **Dadd4**
And finally see what it means to be living

Interlude

3. **Cmaj7** **G5**
You see, my old man's got a problem

Em **Dadd4**
He live with the bottle, that's the way it is

Cmaj7 **G5**
He says his body's too old for working

Em **Dadd4**
I say his body's too young to look like his

Cmaj7 **G5**
My mama went off and left him

Em **Dadd4**
She wanted more from life than he could give

Cmaj7 **G5**
I said, somebody's got to take care of him

Em **Dadd4**
So I quit school and that's what I did

Interlude

Interlude (first four bars of intro)

Cmaj7 **G5** **Em** **Dadd4** play 2x

4. **Cmaj7** **G5**
You got a fast car

Em **Dadd4**
But is it fast enough so we can fly away?

Cmaj7 **G5**
We gotta make a decision

Em **Dadd4**
Leave tonight or live and die this way

Interlude

Chorus

C
I remember when we were driving, driving in your car

G
The speed so fast, I felt like I was drunk

Em
City lights lay out before us

D
And your arm felt nice wrapped round my shoulder

C **Em** **D**
And I had a feeling that I belonged

C **Em** **D**
And I had a feeling I could be someone

C **D**
Be someone, be someone

Interlude

5. **Cmaj7** **G5**
You got a fast car

Em **Dadd4**
And we go cruising to entertain ourselves

Cmaj7 **G5**
You still ain't got a job

Em **Dadd4**
And I work in a market as a checkout girl

Cmaj7 **G5**
I know things will get better

Em **Dadd4**
You'll find work and I'll get promoted

Cmaj7 **G5**
We'll move out of the shelter

Em **Dadd4**
Buy a big house and live in the suburbs

Interlude

Chorus

Interlude

6. **Cmaj7** **G5**
You got a fast car

Em **Dadd4**
And I got a job that pays all our bills

Cmaj7 **G5**
You stay out drinking late at the bar

Em **Dadd4**
See more of your friends than you do of your kids

Cmaj7 **G5**
I'd always hoped for better

Em **Dadd4**
Thought maybe together you and me would find it

Cmaj7 **G5**
I got no plans, I ain't going nowhere

Em **Dadd4**
So take your fast car and keep on driving

Interlude

Chorus

Interlude

7. **Cmaj7** **G5**
You got a fast car

Em **Dadd4**
But is it fast enough so you can fly away?

Cmaj7 **G5**
You gotta make a decision

Em **Dadd4**
You leave tonight or live and die this way

Outro

Cmaj7 **G5** **Em** **Dadd4** *play 3x*

Cmaj7 **G5**

Over the River and through the Woods

Play a jazzy fingerstyle rendition of a Thanksgiving and Christmas evergreen

BY SEAN MCGOWAN

Lydia Maria Child was a noted 19th-century civil rights activist, author, and journalist from Medford, Massachusetts, who wrote “Over the River and through the Wood(s)” as a Thanksgiving song celebrating her childhood memories of visiting family during the holidays. Originally published in Child’s *Flowers for Children*, Vol. 2 (1844), it remains a popular favorite among children and adults to celebrate Thanksgiving and the Christmas season.

This arrangement travels through three different keys, moving from F major to C before finishing in G. After a four-measure intro, the melody begins over a Travis-style bass/chord accompaniment in 6/8 time. Most often, the melody appears over a single bass note or chord, but occasionally the picking-hand fingers outline an arpeggio as a fill during melodic pauses (as in measures 8 and 12).

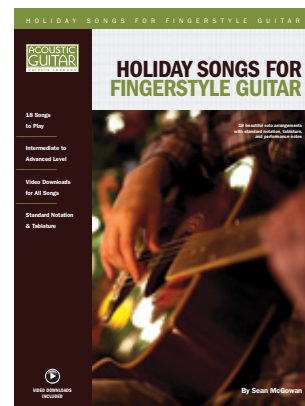
Although the melody notes should sound distinct from the underlying accompaniment, it’s often best to hold down a complete chord shape while articulating the different parts as necessary with your picking hand. For example, in measures 5–8, fret the complete chord voicings for the F, B \flat , and C chords until you encounter the next chord change, and let the picking hand do the work to create the individual parts.

The A section in F major is played twice before modulating to C in measure 27. The melody in the B section is slightly more difficult in that the melody has the same eighth-note rhythms but features fuller chord voicings than those found in the first A section. The B section also introduces a few new harmonies, like the C \sharp dim7 passing chord in measure 30 and the F \sharp dim7 in bar 39. As with the A section, the B section is

played twice before modulating to the final key of G major.

By the time you get to the C section in measure 49, your fretting hand might be feeling the burn. If this is the case, make sure to take frequent breaks during practice sessions, stretch out your hands, and feel free to abbreviate this arrangement during live performances. The C section is very similar to the first two, but also introduces a few new chordal textures such as the Dadd4 in bar 50, Bm7 in 61, and Csus2 chords in measures 51 and 59. Measure 65 begins a four-measure outro to take the song home. Feel free to play these measures slower and more freely to add a dynamic, lyrical quality to the ending.

This arrangement is excerpted from the book Holiday Songs for Fingerstyle Guitar, available at store.acousticguitar.com.



OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS

ARRANGED BY SEAN MCGOWAN



9 **Gm7 C7 F Dm G9 C**

13 **F F7 Bb C F F7**

17 **Bb C Am Dm Gm C F**

1. **Bb C Dm C/E F C F**

2. **F G7 C G Am7 G**

OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS

29

F⁶ G⁷ C⁵ C^{#dim7} D^{m7} G⁹ C A^{m7}

33

D⁹ G⁷ C G/B A^{m7} G

37

F⁶ G C⁷ F⁶ F^{#dim7} C A^m

harm.

41

D^m G⁶ C

1. C D^{m6} G/B G

45

F G C^{sus4} C

2. D^{add4}



C

G D/F# Em7 Dadd4 Csus2 Gmaj7/B G

49

Am7 D7/F# G F#m Em Aadd9 D5 D/F#

53

G D/F# Em7 Dadd4 Csus2 Gmaj7/B G G7

57

Cadd9 Bm7 Em7 Am7 D G

61

Cadd9 Bm7 Am7 D/F# G G/D G

65

Guitarra Picante

Ralph Towner revisits an Oregon classic on solo guitar

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

Many of the songs published in *AG* are built from just a handful of chords, but glance through this transcription of Ralph Towner's "Guitarra Picante" and you'll find a whopping nearly three dozen different chord symbols.

Towner first recorded the composition with his band Oregon on the 1991 album *Always, Never, and Forever*, and *AG* published the notation that same year. (See the January/February 1991 issue.) On his most recent album, *At First Light*, Towner revisits "Guitarra Picante" in a solo guitar setting, and this transcription is based on that new recording.

While steel-string guitarists tend to roll chords of four or more notes, Towner, who primarily plays the nylon-string, uses a classical fingerstyle technique to sound all the voices simultaneously. "This effect mimics the attack of a horn section as well as gives a pianistic

sound to the delivery," he wrote in the performance notes to *AG*'s earlier transcription.

"Guitarra Picante" features a bunch of five-note chords, requiring the highest voice to be picked with the pinky, a bit louder than the lower members. "A good gauge or test of the quality of tone produced by your little finger is to match it with the tone of your other fingers," Towner wrote. "Try to develop each finger so its sound equals the others."

On the new recording, Towner plays through the form once, shown here in full, then improvises on it through several passes.

The unusual chords provide many interesting melodic possibilities. For instance, over the B7 alt seen in measures 8 and 23–34, Towner wrote that using "an eight-tone scale beginning on any natural note, including all the notes of the C major scale plus a G#, suits the chord rather well."

In learning "Guitarra Picante," whether getting the chords under your fingers or improvising over the changes, be sure to compare the new recording to the original Oregon version, as the solo guitar arrangement really shows the composition in a new light. **AG**



W. PATRICK HINELY

GUITARRA PICANTE

MUSIC BY RALPH TOWNER

♩ = 126

with improvised variations on repeats

Eadd9/G# Dsus2/C# Badd9/D# E♭maj7/G# Dsus2/C# B7#9

C#m Cmaj9 Bm11 Am7 Dadd9/F# Bsus2/A# F11 E♭m7/F# C#7/E# B6b9

Eadd9/G# Dsus2/C# Badd9/D# 3 E maj7/G# Dsus2/C# B7#9

C#m Cmaj9 Bm11 Am7 Dadd9/F# Bsus2/A# F11 Am7 G#m7 C#7alt

F# C#add9/E# D#m11 C#m11 Cm11 Bm7 D#11 Am7 G#m11 C#7alt

F# C#add9/E# D#m11 C#m11 Bm11 D#11 D11 B/C# Fmaj9 #11 B6b9

Eadd9/G# Dsus2/C# Badd9/D# 3 E maj7/G# Dsus2/C# B7#9

1.-3.

C#m Cmaj9 Bm11 Am7 Dadd9/F# Badd9/D# Asus2/G# Gadd9/B E

29

4.

Badd9/D# Asus2/G# Gadd9/B E

Aadd9/C#

33

Bm7 Am7 D#m7 Asus2/G# Gadd9/B E

Aadd9/C#

36

Bm7 Am7 Badd9/D# Asus2/G# Gadd9/B E

C#m Cmaj9

40

Bm11 Am7 Dadd9/F# Badd9/D# Asus2/G# Gadd9/B E

rit.

harm.

44

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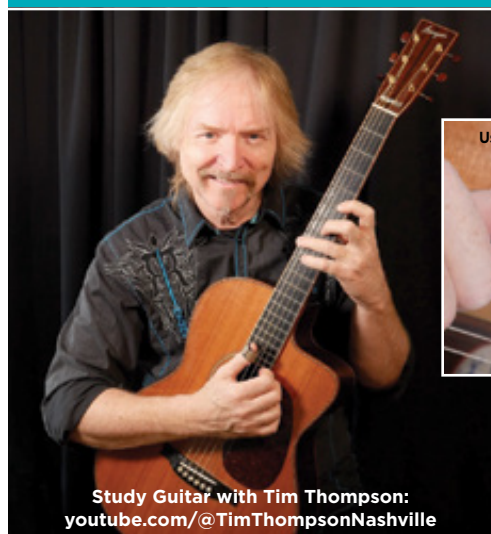
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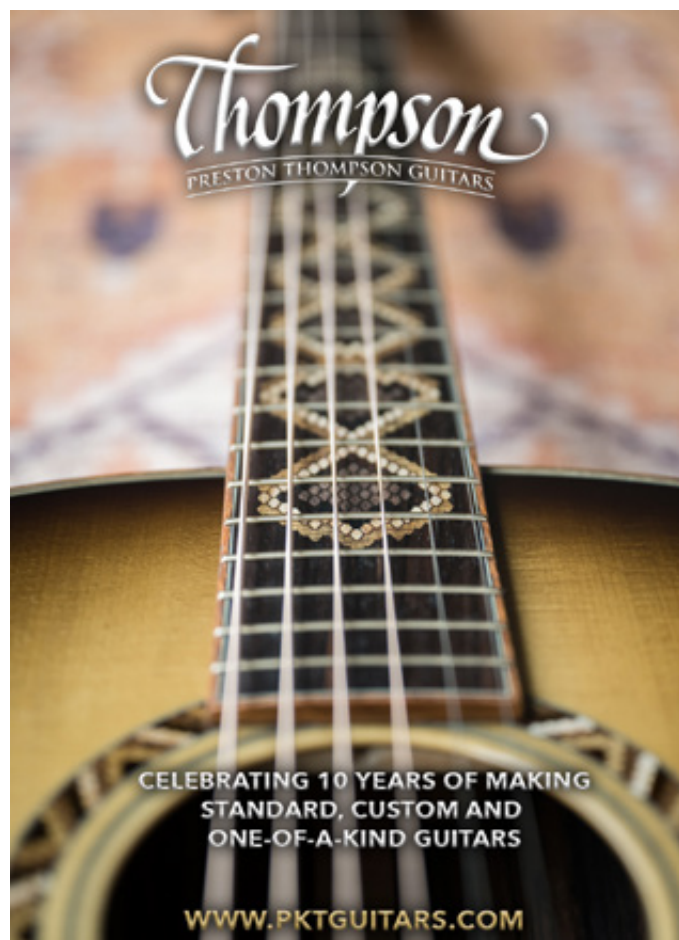
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Jamie Stillway



RICK DAHMS

Red Haired Boy

Jamie Stillway's spacious take on a traditional bluegrass tune

BY ALAN BARNOSKY

The traditional tune “Red Haired Boy” is a favorite among bluegrass pickers, and for good reason. The catchy melody is fun to play, the droning B-part is a great place to start exploring improvisation, and the modal tonality (Mixolydian) makes it rock. The song is heard often at jams, concerts, and on albums, most recently on Jamie Stillway and Eric Skye’s duo guitar release *Over the Waterfall* (reviewed in the May/June 2023 issue)—a follow-up to their 2021 all-original collection *Home on the Midrange*.

Stillway and Skye both come from a background of jazz and improvisation and probably would not consider themselves bluegrass musicians per se. Yet they clearly love fiddle tunes, from which much bluegrass material originates, and approach them in their own style.

Many of the tracks on *Over the Waterfall* are well-known selections, but they’re played deliberately and slowly compared to the flash and speed typically heard among grassers. The difference with Stillway and Skye is

that they take their time to get to their destination. The first minute or so of each track states the tune’s melody, and over each repetition they delve further into spacious improvisational territory until landing in what Stillway calls “free skate,” where they both are improvising and responding to each other simultaneously. This type of unstructured improvisation would be madness under the rigid rules of a traditional bluegrass jam, but for Stillway and Skye it is a vehicle to showcase their creative ideas. These slower speeds also provide room to reveal the sonic quality of their instruments harmonizing and ringing together.

The notation presented here is Stillway’s rendition of the “Red Haired Boy” melody. Her version is an excellent one to learn, whether you intend to play it in the spacious spirit of Stillway and Skye or in a speedy picking session along with banjos and fiddles. On the album, Stillway ends her first pass through the tune with a scalar improvisational passage. For ease

of learning, I have omitted that from the transcription and instead am presenting the tune’s melody in full.

One of the most striking elements in Stillway’s playing is the natural fluidity she achieves between notes. To mimic this, focus on letting notes ring as long as possible. For example, when there is a string change, allow the note on the previous string to ring as you play the next string. When there is no string change, allow the previous note to ring out until you pick the next one. This is a difficult technique to get accustomed to and can sound unusual at first, but when done well it can make a melodic passage come to life.

As for the other hand, focus on alternate picking, which means coordinating downstrokes with the beats of each measure and upstrokes with the “ands,” as indicated between the standard notation and tablature lines. This picking approach is standard for flatpickers and helps replicate the bouncy rhythmic pulse of a fiddle.

AC

RED HAIRD BOY

TRADITIONAL, ARRANGED BY JAMIE STILLWAY

Capo II

$\text{♩} = 120$

The score is written for guitar with a capo at the second fret. It consists of four systems of music, each with a treble staff and a bass staff. The first system (measures 1-4) features chords G, C, G, and F. The second system (measures 5-8) features chords G, C, G, and a first/second ending with D and G. The third system (measures 9-12) features chords F, C, G, and F. The fourth system (measures 13-16) features chords G, C, G, and a first/second ending with D and G. The bass staff includes detailed tablature with fret numbers and fingerings. The treble staff includes a melody line with a repeat sign at the beginning of each system. The first and second endings are marked with '1.' and '2.' respectively.

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On Top of Old Smoky

A fresh look at a centuries-old waltz

BY MAURICE TANI



Maurice Tani

“On Top of Old Smoky” (sometimes spelled Smokey) is a traditional folk song with roots extending back to England, perhaps as far as the 16th century. It’s a mournful, lonesome waltz with a sweet, lilting melody and a lyric full of regret and bitterness. Passed from generation to generation for centuries, “Old Smoky” has been recorded in a wide variety of styles by all sorts of artists—to name just a handful, Libby Holman, Pete Seeger, the Weavers (whose

version reached the pop charts in 1951), Connie Francis, and Bruce Springsteen.

The song is customarily played with a simple three-chord progression, containing just the I, IV, and V chords, or C, F, and G, respectively, in the key of G major. That certainly gets the job done, but I like to do some harmonic embellishments. For instance, instead of just sticking with the C chord for the duration of bars 2–5, I add the relative minor chord, Am, in measure 4. I do the same thing

with G and Em in bars 6–9. And in measure 10, instead of playing a regular open D chord, I add the third, F#, in the bass, followed by a D7, also with a low note of F#.

In terms of the picking hand, I use a classic waltz pattern: a bass note on beat 1 (either the root or the fifth of the chord), followed by downstroke strums on 2 and 3, sometimes with an upward strum added on the “and” of the beat. Little details like these help bring fresh color and anticipation to this old waltz. **AG**

ON TOP OF OLD SMOKY

TRADITIONAL, ARRANGED BY MAURICE TANI

Intro/Strumming Pattern

Chord diagrams for the Intro/Strumming Pattern:

- C**: x32010
- Am**: x02310
- G**: 320004

Verse

Chord diagrams for the Verse:

- G**: 320004
- *G7**: 320001
- C**: x32010
- Am**: x02310

1. On top of Old Smo - ky, _____ all cov - ered with
 court - in's a plea - sure _____ and part - ing is
 3.–8. See additional lyrics

*First time only, play G chord instead of G7.



6

G
320004

E_m
02300x

D/F#
2x034x

snow,
grief.

I lost my true lov - er
But a false - heart - ed lov - er

0 3 3 2 0 0 0 0

12

D7/F#
2x031x

1.-7.
G
320004

G7
320001

8.
G
320004

a - court - in' too slow.
is worse than a thief.

2. A -
3. A gone.

2 3 2 0 3 3 3

3. A thief he will rob you
And take all you have
But a false-hearted lover
Will send you to your grave

4. And the grave will decay you
And turn you to dust
Not one girl in a hundred
A poor boy can trust

5. They'll hug you and kiss you
And tell you more lies
Than the crossties on the railroad
Or the stars in the skies

6. They'll tell you they love you
Just to give your heart ease
But the minute your back's turned
They'll court whom they please

7. I'll go up on Smoky
On the mountain so high
Where the wild birds and the turtle doves
Can hear my sad cry

8. And as sure as the dewdrops
Fall on the green corn
Last night she was with me
Tonight she is gone

MAKERS & SHAKERS



LUDOVICA MAGAGNIN

For the Love of Wood

Noemi Schembri of Noemi Guitars has dedicated herself to a life in lutherie

BY E.E. BRADMAN

Twenty-eight miles north of Venice, in the Italian province of Treviso, sits the municipality of Susegana, perhaps best known for the Collalto Castle, built in 1110; the Church of the Visitation of the Blessed, from the 13th century; and the Castle of San Salvatore, erected in 1312.

Since 2021, however, there's been a new kid in town. Sicilian luthier Noemi Schembri, owner of Noemi Guitars, has been building world-class acoustic guitars in a clean, sunny shop that shares a complex with a recording studio, a doctor's office, and two wine stores. A lifelong interest in guitar woods and construction led her to earn a degree in industries and wood technologies at the University of Padua in 2006. After closely studying instruments at guitar festivals all over Europe, she built her first guitar in a Michele Della Giustina workshop in 2010 before moving to Canada to study with acclaimed luthier Sergei de Jonge.

Schembri returned to Italy in 2011 and opened her own shop. Her instruments, evenly divided among steel-string, nylon-string, and crossover guitars, have earned rave reviews for their beauty, distinctive designs, tone, volume, and versatility.

You began playing guitar at 11. Does being a player influence your work as a builder?

I don't play much anymore. Building guitars is far more exciting! I wouldn't say that playing impacts the way I build, because people play in such different ways, but having started on guitar does help me understand what I want, and what players want, from an instrument.

Were there any particular instruments you encountered that inspired you to learn more about guitar building?

Not really. Looking at the guitar we had at home made me want to know how it was made, who built it, and where.

What did you learn while studying for your degree in industries and wood technologies at the University of Padua?

We began by learning to recognize different types of wood—cutting very thin slices, putting them under a microscope, studying their physical characteristics, and understanding how different industries use them. Eventually, we studied various finishes and the technical details of wood-cutting machines. It was a very practical education, and I enjoyed every aspect of it.

What were the most important things you learned during your time with Sergei de Jonge?

First, that we learn a lot from our mistakes, and we never stop learning. Second, to never be afraid of exploring different ways of doing things. Third, to keep in mind as I build a guitar that I—or someone else—might need to repair it one day.

Did you intend to fill a particular niche with Noemi Guitars?

No. What set me on the path to starting Noemi Guitars was my love for wood and woodworking. As soon as I finished my first guitar, I decided that this would be my job for the rest of my life.

Do you feel connected to the larger community of Italian acoustic guitar builders?

When I'm at guitar shows in Canada and the U.S. with other colleagues, or when I contact someone asking for advice for a specific repair job, I feel at home and part of a great community. But not in Italy, unfortunately.

Why not, especially given Italy's deep lutherie tradition?

I've asked myself that question many times, and I think it's related to the culture. I have very few Italian guitar-maker friends with whom I share information and opinions or give and receive advice about things like repair jobs. It's totally the opposite feeling of being in the U.S. or Canada, where I feel part of a big, open-minded family.

Is it important for you to stand out and be different from other builders?

More than different, I prefer to be consistent, keep the quality high, and work to increase it. Although small details can make a difference, my goal is not to be different, but for each instrument to be better than the previous one.

How do you find time to build instruments, run a small business, have a life, and do social media?

Next question, please [laughter]. I'm not great with social media, so maybe that's the secret [more laughter]! Seriously, if I spent more time posting my work on social media, I would probably be better known as a guitar builder/repairer and have less time for my life.

I've discovered that it's important to establish how many hours and how many days a week I want to dedicate to work. The rest of the time and weekends are usually dedicated to personal life, except when I have to get ready for a guitar show.

Spending all afternoon in front of a computer placing orders or looking for wood or tools is still part of the job, even if I haven't generated wood dust or made any progress in the build/repair process. If you also do repairs, like me, you quickly understand that it takes quite some time away from guitar building. This is why I do repairs only by appointment. I like to organize my work, and sometimes I can't interrupt what I am working on.

How much time do you spend doing repairs and setups, and what do you learn that helps you with your own instruments?

It's hard to define how much time I spend, because some periods are busier than others, but I learn a lot from repairs. Working on different kinds of guitars, you see what's good or bad about them and how different brands work. If I notice something positive—something that helps sound or playability—that I don't do on my guitars, it makes me think how I might achieve it on my instruments.

What are some specific things you've learned from repair jobs and applied to your own instruments?

Here's an example: The first time I had to re-glue the top bracing on a repair job, I learned that notching them one underneath the other makes it less accessible for repairs,

'Although small details can make a difference, my goal is not to be different, but for each instrument to be better than the previous one.'

—NOEMI SCHEMBRI

so I changed my way of gluing top braces. Doing repairs has also reinforced how fundamental a good neck setup is and what a huge difference it can make. I pay close attention to every detail so that my instruments are as playable as possible.

Describe how you build a custom instrument.

It's a fun process that starts with knowing the customer. It's the hardest part of building a custom instrument and the most fun, too—the hardest because I must understand the dream sound they're hearing, which is not always easy to describe. Words like warm, clear, crispy, distinct, full, rich, deep, and intimate are adjectives to which each of us attaches a slightly different meaning.

I need to know how the customer plays, what kind of music they play, and if they're alone or with a band, so I begin an email exchange or a series of phone calls. This is the moment the customer relationship starts, when we build their dream guitar together. I also ask for audio or video samples, played by them or

somebody else, to understand the sound they're looking for. And of course, guitar measurements—body shape, neck shape, neck thickness, nut width, string spacing, and so on—are totally customized by request.

On the My Mission section of your site, you mention thinking of guitars as work tools.

Yes, I imagine people embracing each guitar and practicing on it for hours every day, or liking its sound so much that it makes them want to play all the time. I don't want them getting bored or tired of the instrument. In fact, I hope they are inspired to write new music that will inspire other people. My process is based on the idea that I build guitars to be working tools.

What do you teach in your guitar-building workshops?

How to build a guitar—their guitar! It's an intensive hands-on course where each student builds a guitar. First, I explain what to do and how to do it while doing it myself, and then the students replicate it on their own guitars, always under my supervision.

How did the pandemic affect your business?

I was very lucky, because at the beginning of 2021, I moved the workshop to a bigger space and used the period of forced inactivity to do everything that needed to be done.

In light of climate change, the availability of wood, and other factors, what do you think about the future of the acoustic guitar?

I think that we'll have less of the wood species we know well, but we will learn how to achieve the best from "new" wood species we haven't used yet, at least not widely.

Have you experimented with new woods?

If by new you mean not commonly used for guitar making, I haven't yet. But I will!

What advice do you have for a luthier, especially a young woman, who is about to open her own shop?

I'd tell them to focus on what they want to obtain and to strongly believe in themselves, because when you're just starting out and things don't flow smoothly, that's when you need to be strongest.

What's next for Noemi Guitars?

My path has been full of challenges, as well as new things to explore. I'm always happy to welcome custom requests like the recent archtop and flamenco guitars I'm currently building. This is the path I want to follow; it's the right one for me.

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Split the Difference

How to set up a single guitar for use in multiple tunings

BY MARTIN KEITH

Q: *I have started playing with alternate tunings on my guitar but they don't always sound great—they're often buzzy and I can't get them to stay in tune. What can I do to make this work better?*
—Jennifer Smith

A: This is a great example of a simple question with a multifaceted answer. A truly well-done guitar setup often involves splitting some fine hairs of action, neck relief, intonation, and more—and alternate tunings certainly can throw some of those fine adjustments out of balance. However, in most cases, a happy medium is possible. When setting up a guitar for a player who uses many alternate tunings, I take a slightly different approach from the usual setup job.

To begin, we want to consider how much variation there will be between the highest and lowest tunings. I seldom encounter alternate tunings with higher pitches or tension than E standard; most of the popular alternates involve tuning down to some degree. Since one of the great satisfactions of lower tunings is the rich, deep bass register, I always want to skew the setup to favor those low notes when I can. This begins with string selection—if a player will regularly be tuning the low E down to a C, for example, I would recommend a thicker string gauge that will give that low C some clarity and depth but will still tolerate tuning to E standard. D'Addario's very helpful online string gauge/tension calculator has been a real asset for me in this process.

A quick interjection: when changing string gauges, especially to larger ones, it's important to make sure the nut slots are cut correctly. A few thousandths of difference in



BILL EVANS

diameter can make the difference between a nut that tunes smoothly and one that binds and pinches—annoying in any context, but especially problematic when you are trying to switch frequently between tunings. This is routine work for any competent instrument tech and will always be money well spent. Also, I have noticed that players who retune frequently can wear down the nut slots more quickly, as the windings in the strings act as an abrasive, chewing away the bone. Composite nut materials with self-lubricating qualities (such as the Graph Tech Tusq products) are sometimes advisable in these situations.

Once we've chosen the string gauges, other complications begin to arise. Putting thicker strings on a guitar means that the truss rod will likely need adjustment, and this

is where the hairsplitting begins. There is a significant difference—nearly 20 percent—in the overall tension of standard tuning versus something like the popular C G D G A D, and the ideal setup for these two tunings would require different truss rod positions. Furthermore, correct setup for the low tuning would probably involve slightly more relief, as the lower-tension bass strings have a wider oscillation. Reality works against you in this case: without adjusting the truss rod between tunings, the higher tuning would have the most relief and the lower tuning would have the least—the opposite of what you want.

In these cases, I generally try to compromise between the lowest and highest tuning tensions and set up the truss rod for that middle tension. For example, using the above



Martin Keith

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tunings, I would set the truss rod ideally with the guitar tuned to D A \flat D G B \flat E \flat , so the variation from ideal position would be minimized in each direction.

Wherever possible, I also recommend that players seek out guitars with rigid necks for playing with alternate tunings. Not only does this minimize neck relief variations, but I and many other builders have found that stiff necks can improve the response of lower-frequency notes. The brilliant Adrian Legg, who has been at the forefront of alternate tunings for decades, has chosen Adamas and other guitars with multipiece laminated necks. Modern guitars with carbon-fiber neck reinforcements are also a good choice.

The same issues of tension arise with the top itself. On a lightly built guitar, there may be noticeably more top deflection with the higher tunings than with lower ones. Because there are not many options available here, I use the same approach of setting the bridge

Perfect intonation is nearly unattainable on any equal-tempered instrument, and guitars are no exception.

saddle height using a median tuning, in hopes that the uppermost and lowermost ranges will stay close enough to the ideal setup to be satisfactory.

The final struggle is with intonation. It is perfectly reasonable to expect that a .052" string tuned to E will have a different intonation point than a .058" or .062" tuned to low C. Lower tension strings are also often less forgiving in this regard, since it is considerably easier to bend them sharp while playing. In a few cases, I've had players bring me low-tuned guitars complaining of intonation issues, and the instrument checked out fine with the electronic tuner—but the demands of actual chordal playing are very different from the controlled workbench environment.

Thicker strings tend to be less flexible, and thus require more intonation compensation. Since these adjustments on an acoustic guitar are usually both time consuming and limited (you can only squeeze so much out of a 1/8" saddle, after all!), this is where string gauge selection can go a long way. It's often a question of finding a balance between the string that sounds best at low C, and the string that plays

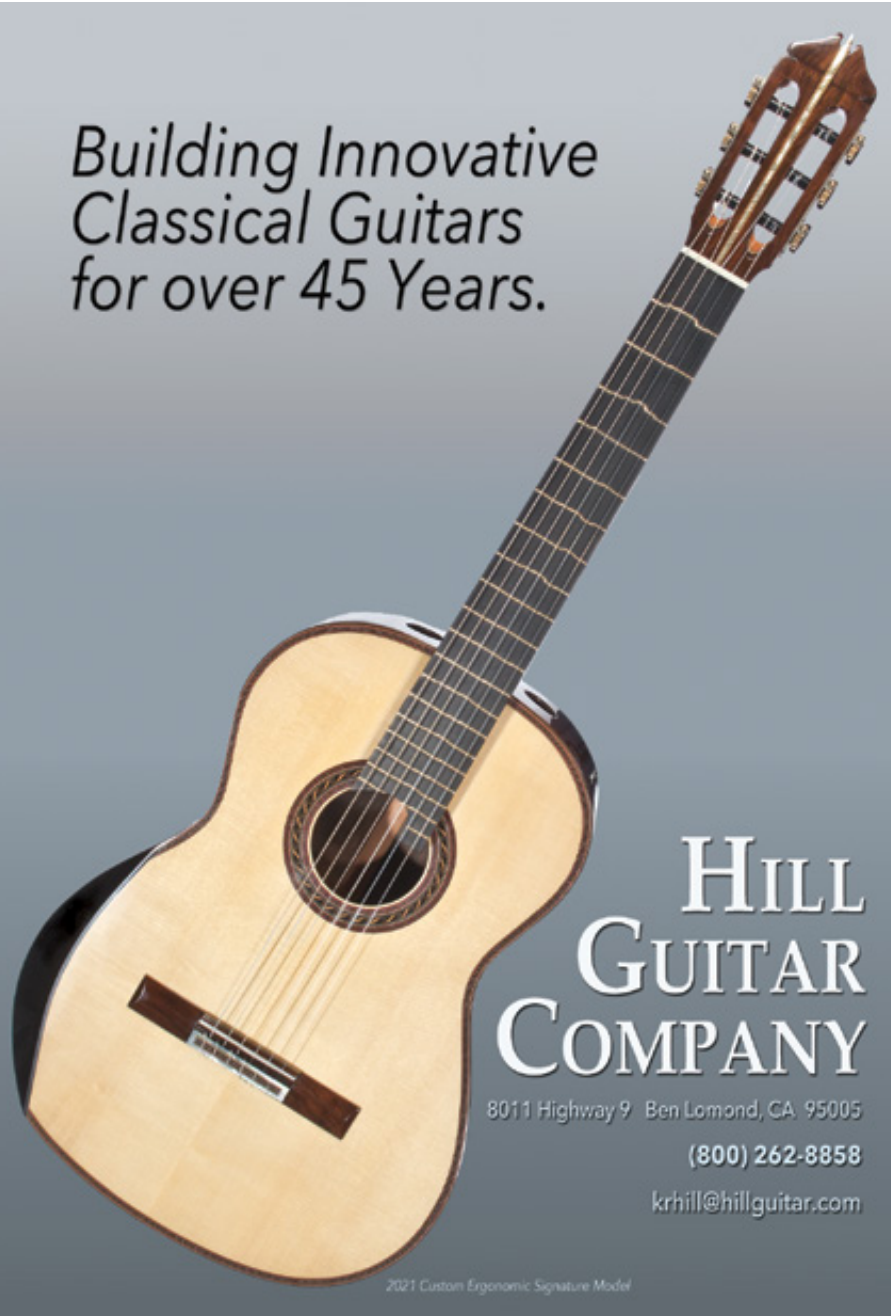
in tune in upper positions. Trying different string compositions (hex core versus round core, and different core to wrap ratios) can also be helpful in dialing in the best choice—alongside an acceptance that perfect intonation is nearly unattainable on any equal-tempered instrument, and guitars are no exception.

Alternate tunings are a fascinating and exciting way to break out of conventional patterns and ruts in practice and composition. I can't let this question go by without mentioning some important players who have paved the way for this approach—Joni Mitchell, Ani

DiFranco, Pierre Bensusan, Will Ackerman, Andy McKee, Antoine Dufour, and many more have proven the creative potential of alternate tunings. More recently, some adventurous players have integrated retuning into the music itself; Jon Gomm and Alexandr Misko are great examples of the musical value of this technique.

With a few careful adjustments, most guitars can be set up to improve the sound and feel of lower tunings, and the results might make the difference you need to continue exploring.

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Martin Super D and D-18 StreetLegend

Two bold new takes on classic dreadnoughts from the legacy maker

BY JAMES VOLPE ROTONDI

With the new Super D and D-18 StreetLegend models, C.F. Martin and Company has not exactly reinvented the wheel, but has certainly taken their classics out for a little fresh air. The Custom Shop Super D (Super Dreadnought) literally stretches the design of the standard dreadnought, expanding the body's width from the standard 15-5/8" to a noticeably larger 16-3/8"—or an approximate increase of 20 percent more air volume within the body. This beast is the largest in Martin's current lineup.

The D-18 StreetLegend, meanwhile, is part of a new line of distressed-looking guitars that also includes a D-28. The D-18

appears more radically relic'd—a cosmetic treatment that bears an eerie resemblance to Kurt Cobain's legendary 1953 D-18, affectionately known as "Grandpa," which now resides in the Martin Museum.

While each of these new offerings from Martin stretches the parameters of the classic models they build upon, neither abandons the core sonic or build qualities—or simply the overall excellence—that one expects when making a significant purchase like a D-28 or a D-18. That said, the vision behind them includes a certain creative energy that's palpable as you play, proof positive of the adage "What's old is new again."

CUSTOM SHOP SUPER D

Though at first blush the Super D might look intimidating to hold, the increased body size should be quite manageable for anyone accustomed to playing a standard dreadnought. The same can be said of its gorgeously carved and tapered mahogany neck with a modified low oval shape, which felt true and comfortable straight out of the rather large case.

As dreadnoughts go, a D-28 is pretty much a cannon to begin with, so you won't be shocked to learn that the Super D moves some serious air—up to 12dB more volume than a standard model, as gauged by Martin's in-house testing. With its torrefied Sitka spruce top, three-piece Guatemalan rosewood back and sides, and increased girth, the Super D possesses an incredibly full and dynamic sound. (The guitar is also available with figured koa back and sides.)

Not only is the Super D loud, it produces an outstandingly rich and lustrous tone, with an especially proud low-end response. Try playing it in open G or double dropped D for perhaps the richest bass tones you've ever heard from a Martin. As for the mids and highs, it's almost as if they overlap perfectly, so lush is the sound with both plectrum and fingerstyle. The Super-D formula has found a sort of smooth and organic integration of frequencies—toppy and coppery in the highs as well as supportive and velvety in the mids, with a very natural and robust EQ arc that never lets you think of them as in any way separate. A very satisfying sound, to say the least.

CUSTOM SHOP SUPER D

BODY 14-fret super dreadnought body; VTS (Vintage Tone System) Sitka spruce top; scalloped X-bracing; three-piece Guatemalan rosewood or koa back and sides; ebony bridge; drop-in saddle with 2-5/32" string spacing; tortoise pattern pickguard; gloss finish

NECK Mahogany; dovetail joint; 25.4" scale length; 1-3/4" nut width; modified low oval shape with high-performance taper; ebony fretboard; nickel open-gear Gotoh tuners; satin finish

OTHER Martin Authentic Acoustic Lifespan 2.0 strings (.013–.056); ply hardshell case; available left-handed

MADE IN USA

PRICE \$4,999 street



Super D
Koa

D-18
StreetLegend



D-18 STREETLEGEND

The D-18 is one of the most iconic of all dreadnoughts—an essential tool of singer-songwriters, flatpickers, and fingerstylists alike for the better part of a century. Crucially, the StreetLegend iteration has every bit of that characteristic midrange bump, sculpted bass response, even dynamic range across the strings, and great volume and projection associated with forward-shifted, scalloped bracing and mahogany back and sides.

In terms of build quality and sonic character, the D-18 StreetLegend is entirely worthy of the model and the maker.

The StreetLegend ticks all those boxes, and I found it equally ideal for accompanying my voice, adding acoustic overdubs, and playing full-bodied fingerstyle rolling patterns. And like the Super D, the guitar's mahogany neck has a modified low oval shape and high-performance taper, for a sleek and inviting feel, to say nothing of a perfect Plek setup from the factory. In terms of build quality and sonic character, the D-18 StreetLegend is entirely worthy of the model and the maker.

I must quickly clear up any potential misconceptions regarding the aged appearance of this guitar's top. About those dramatic gouge marks that look so badass in the photos or from a short distance: You'd never even know they were there if you closed your eyes and ran a finger across the soundboard. That's because the "wear" has been applied using a technology known as digital microburst printing, which means that the integrity of the guitar's top has not been compromised in any way. The look may be antique and beaten, but you're getting a brand-new D-18. That's also the case with the D-28 StreetLegend, which uses the same application for its slightly less aged-looking top.

Although they don't carry the StreetLegend designation, there are two additional new satin-finished D-18s, each exuding a similarly cool vintage vibe: a natural finish version, and my personal favorite, the lovely Amber Burst.



D-18
StreetLegend

Oh, and one other noteworthy advantage to these fresh D-18s: Due to the less time- and material-consuming nature of the process involved in applying a satin finish, they list at \$400 less than the standard gloss model.

THE BOTTOM LINE

For many, C.F. Martin and Co. is more than just a guitar maker. Owing to its long history and continued intersection with American folk and popular culture, the Martin experience is as much a mindset as simply a set of musical tools. Balancing that kind of legacy—and those kind of high expectations—with the evolution of popular music and the emerging trends of the modern guitar market can't be an easy ask, yet it's an essential one.

The new Super D ably adds a literal new dimension to both the brand and the model, and yes, there's a sizable cost for the unimpeachable excellence it delivers. I'm perhaps less sold on the D-18 StreetLegend, with its not-exactly-authentic aging, but the guitar's excellent tone and easy playability do recommend it to dreadnought lovers of all types.

AC

D-18 STREETLEGEND

BODY 14-fret dreadnought; spruce top; forward-shifted, scalloped X-bracing; mahogany back and sides; ebony modern belly bridge; drop-in saddle with 2-5/32" string spacing; tortoise pattern aged pickguard; satin finish with digital-microburst-printed top

NECK Mahogany; dovetail joint; 25.4" scale length; 1-3/4" nut width; modified low oval shape with high-performance taper; ebony fingerboard; nickel open-gear tuners; satin finish

OTHER Martin Authentic Acoustic Lifespan 2.0 strings (.013–.056); hardshell case; available left-handed

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF FISHMAN

Fishman AFX Mini Acoustic Pedals

Four smart effects units tailored for your guitar

BY EMILE MENASCHÉ

Fishman's new AFX Mini Acoustic pedals were more than two years in the making, and it seems that a lot of that time was spent thinking about ways acoustic guitarists could optimize their rigs—and how acoustic and electric players' needs differ.

The four offerings in the series include the Pocket Blender mixer (and more), AcoustiVerb reverb, Broken Record looper and sampler, and Pro EQ Mini preamp with graphic equalizer. Each runs on 9-volt external power and has a handsome design with a painted front panel, brushed aluminum housing, and clearly labeled controls.

What sets the AFX series apart from most effects is that the quarter-inch jacks are TRS (tip/ring/sleeve) stereo, allowing them to route two independent signals. This feature offers more control over the signal path if you use TRS and/or Y cables, but the pedals work perfectly well with mono cables too.

The reverb, EQ, and looper all let you choose between buffered and true bypass, and whether they work on the tip or ring part of the signal path. You can, for example, set up two different spatial effects and toggle between them, separate the guitar's dry signal from the effect and send each to a different amp, and much more.

Let's take a brief look at each effect; check out the video for a more in-depth look at some of the features.

POCKET BLENDER

Harder to briefly explain than it is to use, this Swiss Army knife can work as a dual level switcher, A/B box, balanced DI, clean boost, and more. There are four faders—two for the tip and two for the ring—each with an A and B mix position accessed by the footswitch.

In mono, you could set two levels, one for rhythm and the other for lead, or plug two guitars into the TRS input using a Y cable and set their



relative levels while muting the one you're not playing. And that's just in the A/B toggle mode; others include A+B/mute, A+B/A, and A+B/B.

The output scheme makes the Pocket Blender even more powerful. Its ABY jack lets you send the A and B signals to separate amps or effects, while the DI jack uses Fishman's balanced driver circuit, which can feed a mixer.

PRO EQ MINI

This combination preamp/EQ is designed to act as the front end for a range of different acoustic guitar pickups. Its preamp offers up to 20dB of clean gain, while the trim control lets you match the pedal to your instrument's electronics. The LED indicates level and helps you optimize gain for your rig. The graphic EQ has five bands: Low Cut (very useful for fighting feedback), Bass, Middle, Treble, and Brilliance. Overall, the Pro EQ's sound is extremely clean, with frequencies well-tuned for acoustic guitar.

Here's a cool extra: The footswitch toggles between the EQ setting and no EQ, and includes some clever features that, depending how long you hold it, allow you to toggle between mute and bypass, and even reverse the polarity for improved bass response in certain situations.

ACOUSTIVERB

The 32-bit AcoustiVerb has a big, lush sound and plenty of headroom. Its three modes include Spring, Hall, and Plate; the last was my favorite for acoustic guitar, while Spring really nailed it for electric. Other controls include level (mix), decay time, and tone. The Audio Path switch lets you decide whether the reverb applies to the ring or the tip input/output. Overall, the AcoustiVerb boasts an impressive sound, easy operation, and surprising versatility.

BROKEN RECORD

This 32-bit digital looper/sampler has the

same signal and bypass switching as the AcoustiVerb. A mini-switch lets you choose between looper and sampler modes. You can play over the loop and add to it by overdubbing, mixing the live sound and loops with the level control. The audio quality is outstanding and there is plenty of recording time. In sampler mode, you can play audio once without looping, like a background track. And the Broken Record lets you transfer to computer via USB—a very useful feature.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Fishman's AFX series is a very impressive set of effects. While clearly designed to work together, the four pedals can fit into any rig. Even in mono mode, they sound good enough to justify their \$119 street price each (Pocket Bender is \$89.95)—especially considering their advanced signal routing and other intelligent features. **fishman.com**

AC



Molly Tuttle and Golden Highway, *City of Gold* (Nonesuch Records)

Bluegrass Gold

Molly Tuttle leans into her flatpicking roots on a brilliant new ensemble album

BY BLAIR JACKSON

It's been a steady upward climb for 30-year-old acoustic guitar phenom Molly Tuttle. The accolades came early: Back in 2017, Tuttle won the International Bluegrass Association's Guitar Player of the Year Award (amazingly, the first woman to do so). She repeated as winner the following year. Over time she's collaborated with many of the finest players in the bluegrass world, established herself as a formidable songwriter and emotive singer, and put out a series of excellent studio recordings.

It was Tuttle's 2022 release *Crooked Tree*—her first with her bluegrass group, Golden Highway, along with such notable guests as Billy Strings, Margo Price, and Gillian Welch—that launched her career into the bluegrass stratosphere. That record won the Best Bluegrass Album category at the 65th annual Grammy Awards in February 2023, and Tuttle

was also among the ten nominees for Best New Artist—the only acoustic/country performer. It was also named Album of the Year at the 2023 International Folk Music Awards.

Molly Tuttle and Golden Highway's second Nonesuch album, *City of Gold*, was released at the end of July 2023, and it may very well eclipse the unexpected success of its predecessor. It certainly deserves to: In my view it's a stronger record in every way. The album, with producer Jerry Douglas once again at the helm along with Tuttle, was recorded in Nashville after Tuttle and Golden Highway had a year of touring together under their belts, so it really feels like more of a group effort than *Crooked Tree*. The mysterious—and essential—telepathy that is a characteristic of the finest bluegrass bands is very much on display throughout *City of Gold*, as Tuttle, fiddler Bronwyn Keith-Hynes,

mandolin master Dominick Leslie, bassist Shelby Means, and banjo ace Kyle Tuttle (no relation) mesh beautifully, playing together as a flawless unit, singing perfect harmonies, and effortlessly passing the baton around for short, virtuosic solo bursts. Douglas adds his always-welcome dobro touch to three of the tunes, Dave Matthews sounds fantastic on a vocal duet with Tuttle (“Yosemite”), and Jordan Perlson

Tuttle and Golden Highway had a year of touring together under their belts, so *City of Gold* really feels like more of a group effort.

plays drums on “Next Rodeo,” an ode to “tearing up the road with a five-piece band.”

As great as the singing and playing is on this album, it's really the strength of the songwriting that makes *City of Gold* so compelling. All 13 songs were written by Tuttle and Ketch Secor, the multi-instrumentalist co-founder of Old Crow Medicine Show, who also co-wrote 10 of the 13 songs on *Crooked Tree*. Musically, the album doesn't stray far from traditional bluegrass and old-time music tropes—your basic barnburners, waltzes, folkish blues, and moving ballads. But lyrically, the songs are all over the place: “El Dorado” is a vivid slice of history told by “Gold Rush Kate from the Golden State/ With a nugget around my neck”; “Yosemite” paints a picture of a rocky relationship that falls apart on a road trip; the breathless “San Joaquin” twists a traditional train anthem into a song about pot smuggling; “Alice in the Bluegrass” cleverly recasts a familiar Lewis Carroll episode in a “backwoods wonderland”; the dark “Goodbye Mary” seems to be a haunting tale about a doomed pregnancy; and the album-closing “The First Time I Fell in Love” is a charming slice of Tuttle autobiography, with a twist on the title I won't spoil.

I suppose I'll have to wait for a live album down the road or jump onto YouTube to hear Tuttle really cut loose on guitar for extended passages. But there's still plenty of flash and substance to absorb and devour here in Tuttle's economical playing on two Pre-War dreadnoughts—one Brazilian rosewood and the other mahogany—as well as an Indian rosewood Huss and Dalton OM. **AC**

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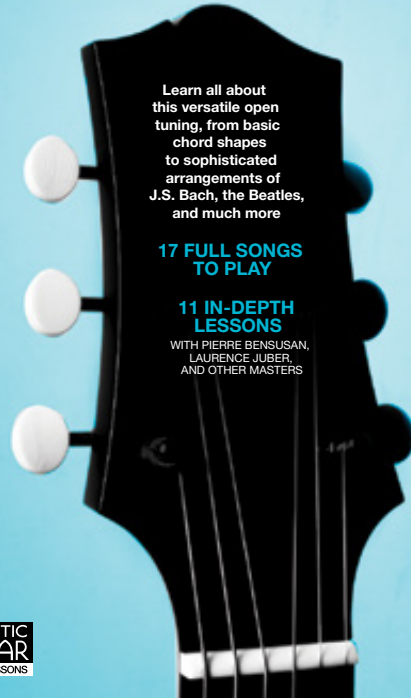


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Mystery 12-String

The late Robbie Basho's cherished instrument resurfaces

BY BUCK CURRAN

In an era when America was deeply entrenched in a war in Southeast Asia, with much social unrest back home, Berkeley, California-based instrumentalist and singer Robbie Basho romanticized historical and mythical things, faraway places, cultures, and religions. Within those tumultuous times, it's not surprising he created an alternate universe of mystical, spiritual music using a century-old 12-string of mysterious origin.

When Basho acquired the guitar in the early 1960s, the top had been smashed, so he got a violinmaker to replace it. The refurbished instrument, its four-piece German spruce top distinguished by a striped center panel and curly figuring on the lower right bout, can be seen on the covers of *The Falconer's Arm II* (1967) and *Art of the Acoustic String Guitar 6 & 12* (1979). Its new top, rosette, and purfling reveal the craftsmanship of an adept luthier, improving on this unique guitar thought to have originally been made in Mexico.

By the early 1980s, Basho's 12-string had seen further modifications, including a new fretboard with pearl dot inlays, along with a contemporary bridge. But the instrument retained its most distinctive details—a four-point abalone star inlaid at the top of the slotted headstock, paired with a smaller pearl figure closer to the nut. And its back and sides made with parota (a light but strong tropical hardwood commonly used to make the Mexican bajo sexto) remained intact.

After Basho's sudden passing, in 1986, the 12-string went into a storage space managed by Sufism Reoriented (a San Francisco Bay Area religious order that Basho belonged to), where it remained until it was rediscovered in 2014 by filmmaker Liam Barker, who at the time was making a documentary on the guitarist. The instrument was then given to my dear friend Steffen Basho-Junghans, a German guitarist and Basho acolyte, who in turn gifted it to me before his sad passing in December of 2022.

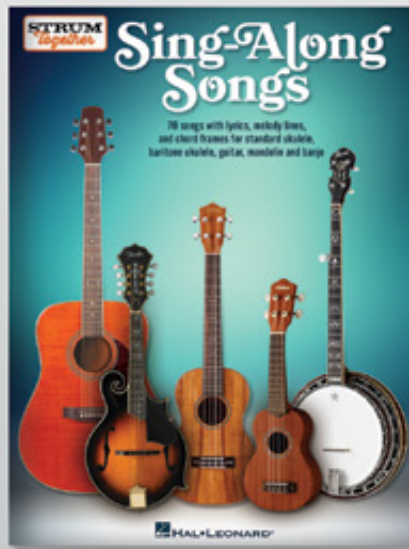
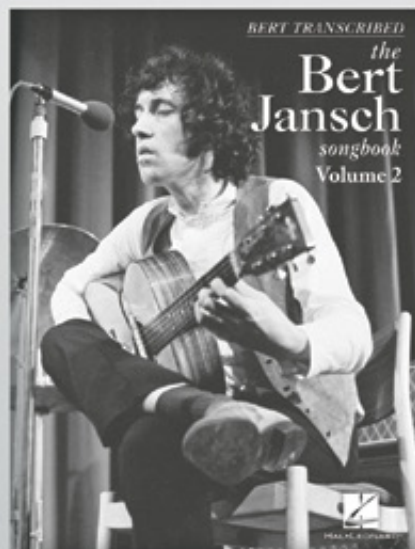
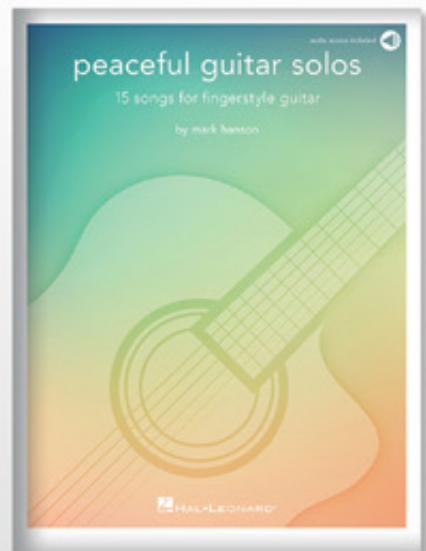
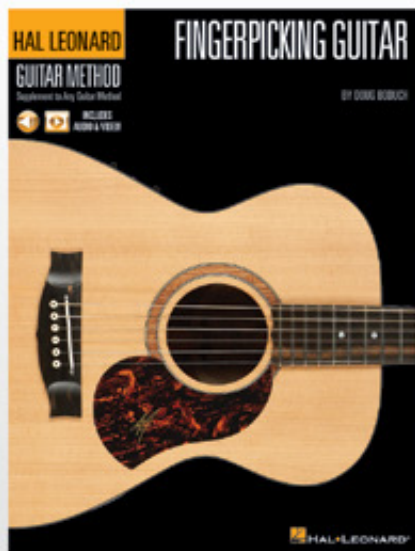
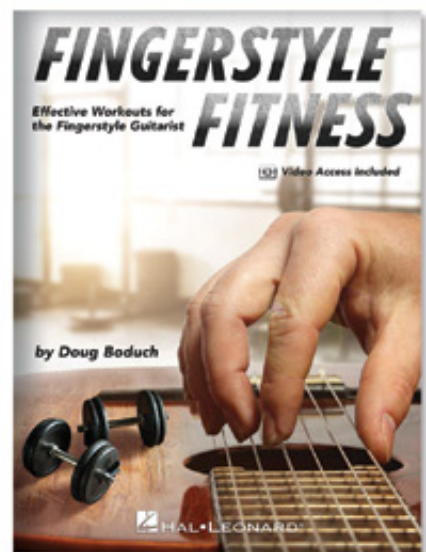
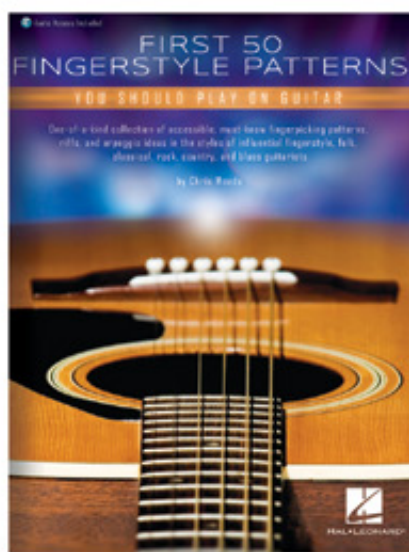
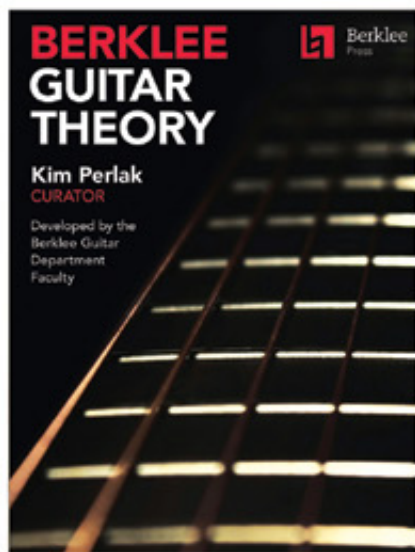


DAVID JAMES LOGAN

Holding the guitar today imparts an extraordinary feeling of mysticism and history. It is extremely lightweight and responsive, with deep, cathedral-like basses and delicate, ethereal trebles—despite being in desperate need of a

neck reset and other repairs. Strumming the natural harmonics puts me in the heart of Basho's signature instrumental "Cathedrals et Fleur de Lis," getting me closer to understanding why he cherished this soulful instrument. **AG**

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